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Giant western

VOL. 2, No. 1 SUMMER, 1948 Price 25c

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Where all hands get together to ride herd on a gala fiction roundup

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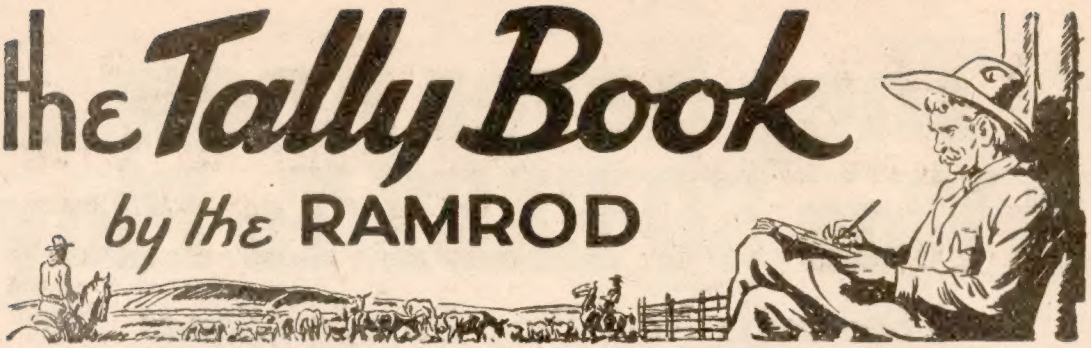
by the RAMROD



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In order to live, every critter has to kill others. Insects kill and eat each other, the birds hunt down insects, mice, moles, gophers; the hawks and owls hunt the birds and the rabbits and squirrels, and the bigger animals like coyotes and foxes and wolves are busy hunting deer and grouse and antelope and sheep to kill and eat. Everything in nature is either hunting or running from the hunters.

Raw and Tough

Nature is raw and tough. Any kindness in it has been pretty well brought there by man, though come to think of it, man hasn't got too good a record in that department himself. It was man who wiped out the wild pigeon, nearly did for the bison and is repeating on the Alaskan caribou right now. It's only man that hunts for pleasure, not for food. And all the work that goes into educating man to be a decent citizen and a kindly sort of fellow gets plenty of opposition from the cave-man instincts which are still kicking around in a lot of us.

Of course, the pioneers didn't have much chance to cultivate sweetness and light. They were up against a raw, tough country and it was kill or be killed most of the time, just as it was for the animals and Indians. With the first whites in the country it was even more. They had to fight Nature to start with, the Indians second, and then as they began taking out some of the natural wealth of the country, the pesky whites started fighting each other.

The Lure of Wealth

That's where the element of greed comes in, which no animal, and no Indian would even understand. The white man's lust for riches, or power, that was a new one on the original inhabitants, you might say.

All over the west, men contended for its gold and its grazing lands and its timber and fur and the fish in its streams. Thousands of men whose names we'll never know, fought and died in their strange drive to get rich. Many a lonely canyon of the west holds a grim secret—some bleached and rotting bones, or a skull—which is swallowed up and lost in the timelessness of the desert.

One of these wars, which was fought on a big scale in the old west, was the struggle between cattle and sheep for grazing rights, and this is the theme of our big novel in the next issue, THUNDER OVER DIABLO CANYON, by Frank Richardson Pierce.

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Special Fact Features

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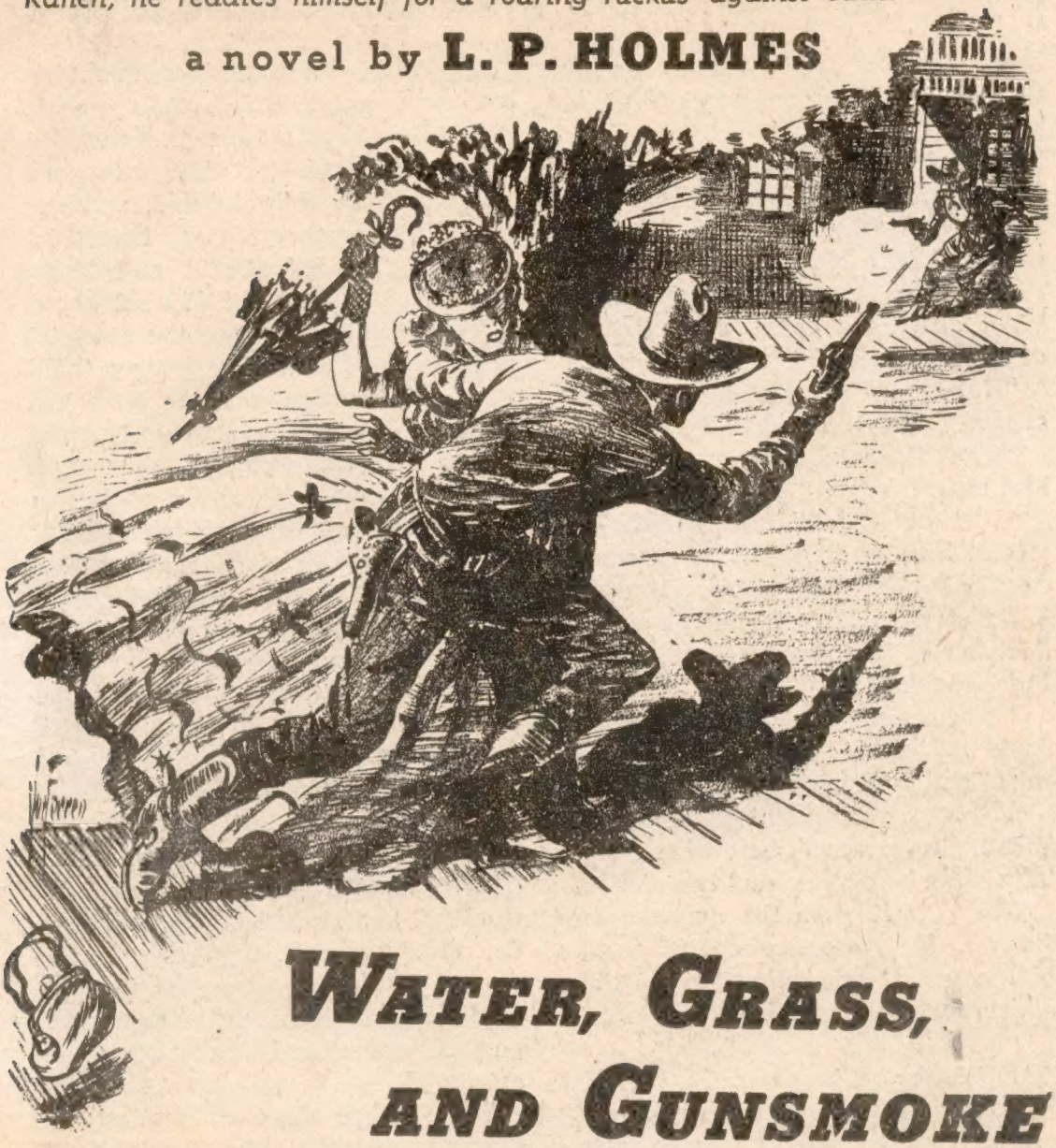


WATER, GRASS, AND GUNSMOKE

I

IT WAS a thoroughly used up horse that Logan Ware unsaddled and turned into the cavvy corral at the Hat headquarters. Behind Ware lay petty treachery, a dead man and forty miles of hard riding. Ahead of him lay more trouble, and his mood was to meet it swiftly and ruthlessly.

It was twilight, Long Valley lay cooling under a powder-blue haze. Smoke lifted from the chimney of the cookshack and the savory odor of frying meat came to Ware as he headed for the bunkhouse. His rash mood showed in the swing of his shoulders, the grimness of his mouth and chin. He filled the bunkhouse door with a challenge.

The long room was full of men awaiting the supper gong. On the first bunk "Tex" Fortune sprawled flat on his

back, cigarette smoke knifing upward. Opposite, perched cross-legged on his blankets, "Rainy" Day was at work on a horse-hair bridle, and beyond were "Packy" Maroon, Ed Morlan, "Chain" Kelsey and "Buck" Trubee. But not the two Logan Ware was searching for —not Morry Seever and Spade Orcutt. Ware asked for them, the harshness of his tone bringing a sudden quiet.

"Not here," Tex Fortune finally answered. "Town, I reckon."

"What time did they get back from Red Mountain?"

"I don't know," murmured Tex. "Rainy and me were out all afternoon cleanin' out that Eagle Rock water-hole. When we came back about an hour ago, Seever and Orcutt were headin' down the town trail."

"They wasn't here at two o'clock," spoke up Packy Maroon. "I was line-riden' Bucksnort Creek and my bronc picked up a stone and went lame. Orcutt or Seever wasn't here when I came in to swap broncs, around two o'clock."

Ware didn't push the question any further. He had learned enough to give him a casual approximation of time, which was good enough.

THEY were a tough outfit, this Hat crew. Hamp Rudd had deliberately picked them that way, saying he wouldn't give a thin dime for a crew that didn't have plenty of bark on it. Which was all right while Rudd was alive and there was no question as to who owned every acre of Hat range and every cow under the Hat brand.

But Hamp Rudd was dead, now, and the reins were in Logan Ware's hands and things were stirring all through Long Valley. There were things about Hamp Rudd's legacy which only Ware alone knew. But there were other things which hard, tough, self-centered men might guess at, and, feeling no allegiance to a dead man, begin to weaken under greed. It was difficult to guess who could be fully trusted, and who couldn't. Treachery already had struck through "Spade" Orcutt and Morry Seever. Where might it next show?

The mellow jangle of the steel triangle broke the waiting silence. Ware went out, the crew drifting after him. They had already washed up, so went into the cookshack while Ware paused at the wash bench outside. Tex Fortune alone lingered beside Ware. "Yuh didn't find the girl at Harte City," Tex said. It was a statement, not a question.

Ware turned a dripping face. "How did yuh know?"

"Because Spider Fell was out with word that she's in Canyon, and wantin' to see yuh. The boys are wonderin' what she aims to do."

"I wouldn't know," growled Ware. "After what I just came out of, I wouldn't know what anybody aims to do. Except myself. I got my own trail figured."

"Somethin' shore put rough edges on yuh," murmured Tex. "What's the answer?"

Tex Fortune was the oldest member of the crew, with silver beginning to edge his dark hair. He was lean and leathery and soft-voiced, but as tough as a twisted, weather-blasted juniper. If trust was to be placed in any member of the Hat crew, Tex came closest to justifying it.

"On my way back from Harte City," explained Ware, "I took the old Guenoc trail, past Red Mountain, and I bump into the breed, Ute Rhyde. There's a stranger with him and they are driftin' twenty head of Hat cows toward Big

Sage. Rhyde wastes no time goin' for his gun. See here?"

He touched a forefinger to his sun-darkened neck, where ran a livid line as though a hot iron had touched swiftly in passing.

"That close Rhyde came," said Ware. "I didn't give him time for a second try. The other hombre was slow and I got him through the shoulder. I told him he could have another slug unless

Logan Ware

he wanted to talk. He was plenty scared, and told me him and Ute Rhyde had bought the cows off two fellers that Rhyde seemed real friendly with. He claimed he didn't know the names of the two, but he described Seever and Orcutt—perfect."

Tex swore softly. "I wondered why they been so long ridin' that Red Mountain circle."

"Rhyde and this feller paid two hundred dollars for those twenty cows. That's pretty cheap beef, Tex. But it ended up costin' Rhyde a few more years of misspent life. I drifted the cows back to Red Mountain, then came on in. Now I'm eatin' then headin' for Canyon. I want to see what Mr. Seever and Mr. Orcutt have to say for themselves."

Logan Ware hung up the towel, combed his damp, heavy dark hair with his fingers.

"Yuh want I should let the rest of the crew in on the story?" Tex asked.

Ware turned toward the cookshack door.

"I don't give a hoot," he said curtly. "The snakes, it seems, are beginnin' to crawl out from under the leaves. I'd just as soon have 'em all where I can see 'em."

IT WAS a silent meal, soon over. "Smoky" Atwater, the cook, spoke once.

"Yuh give Logan that message Spider Fell brought, Tex?"

Tex nodded. "Yeah, Smoky."

Ware was still at the table when all the others had finished and left. Smoky Atwater leaned across the table toward him.

"Yuh goin' into Canyon to see that girl, Logan?"

Smoky was a patient old fellow, who had been with the Hat outfit a long, long time.

"I reckon," Ware said.

"There's been talk," said Smoky, "driftin' about that she's figgerin' on handin' out Hat range like it was grub on a platter. Yuh believe that?"

"I've heard talk," admitted Ware briefly. "Yuh wouldn't like that, Smoky?"

"Not much I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Hamp Rudd was a tough old rooster," said Smoky. "But he was a lot of man. Mebbe he had his faults, but

who hasn't? Still and all, Hamp put in a lifetime makin' the Hat what she is today. You know and I know why he did it. It was for his girl, that he never saw again after her ma took her away from here, when she was a splinter too little to toddle. Now if she's playin' with a loco idea of bustin' the Hat up into chunks and handin' 'em over to a flock of lyin' tinhorns like Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell and Lister Beckwith, somethin' ought to be done about it."

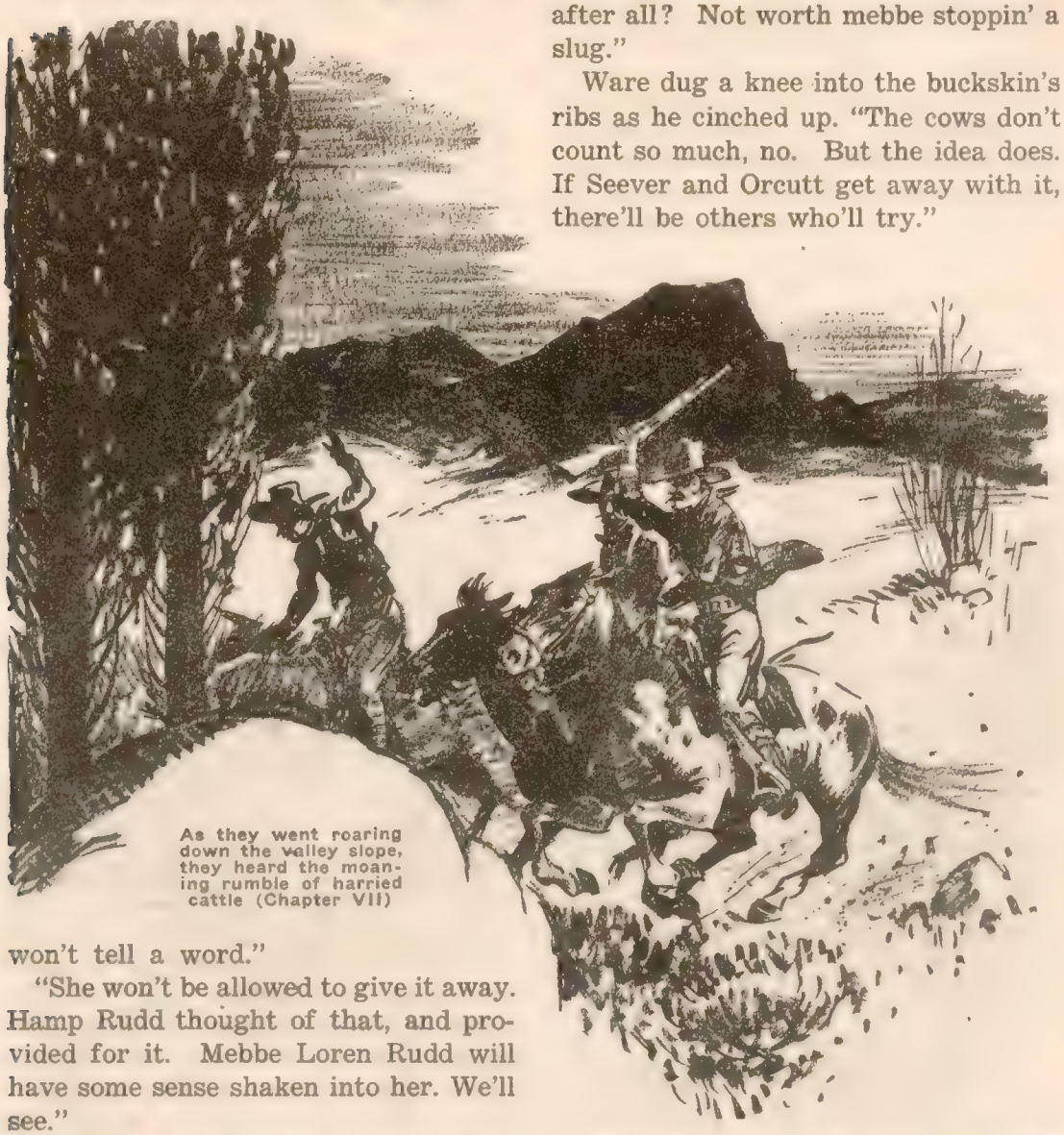
"What, Smoky?"

"Well— er—well, uh—" Smoky stumbled to a confused halt, then blurted desperately, "She oughta be shook and shook till she gets enough sense into her silly head to hang on to every acre of Long Valley range and every Hat cow her pa got for her. And him never gettin' a word of thanks, or expectin' any. I'm tellin' yuh, boy—Hamp Rudd was a lot of man!"

Logan Ware spun a cigarette into shape, and the hardness in his eyes relaxed a little.

"Let yuh in on somethin', Smoky," he said softly. "If yuh won't tell."

Smoky leaned forward eagerly. "I won't tell a word."



As they went roaring down the valley slope, they heard the moaning rumble of harried cattle (Chapter VII)

"She won't be allowed to give it away. Hamp Rudd thought of that, and provided for it. Mebbe Loren Rudd will have some sense shaken into her. We'll see."

"Boy — I feel good! I feel awful good!"

Smoky was grinning as Ware went out, and headed for the corrals.

Twilight had gone and the full soft dark of early night lay over the valley. Ware let himself into the corral, cut out a buckskin, and was saddling up when Tex Fortune came quietly up beside him.

"Nothin' tougher sometimes, kid, than to carry the load a dead man leaves. Hamp Rudd got no thanks. You'll get less. And what's twenty cows, after all? Not worth mebbe stoppin' a slug."

Ware dug a knee into the buckskin's ribs as he cinched up. "The cows don't count so much, no. But the idea does. If Seever and Orcutt get away with it, there'll be others who'll try."

"There'll be others try, anyhow," drawled Tex gravely. "You'll be just one man tryin' to watch a dozen trails at the same time. And it can't be done."

A sharp edge came into Ware's tone. "Just one man, Tex?"

Tex swore. "Don't count on me."

"I am," said Ware evenly. "On you and Rainy Day and I hope, on Packy Maroon. And Smoky, of course. The others—well, they'll jump the way they

jump, and get whatever is comin' to 'em accordin' to the cards they call for."

"Ideals," growled Tex, "never got a man anything. You can't spend 'em over a bar, yuh can't buy grub with 'em."

"Tex, yuh don't take a man's wages, and eat his grub, and ride with the pride of his ontfit in yuh while he's alive, and after he's dead help slice to pieces the thing he built. No, Tex, you don't—and still go on living with yourself. Not if yuh're more than half a man. And you are."

WARE stepped up and spun the buckskin away in a lope.

Tex Fortune stared after him through the night. "I hope yuh see more in me than I see in myself, kid," he muttered. "Right now I'm not so shore—not so shore."

The buckskin was fresh and full of run, an easy gaited horse which, combined with the full meal Ware had eaten, enabled him to let some of the burden of fatigue slide from his shoulders.

Word that Loren Rudd was in Canyon had startled Ware. That she wanted to see him held a thread of hope, too. Maybe there was reason in the girl, after all. But the talk Ware had heard could not be wholly discounted in light of the attitude the girl's mother had taken through all of Hamp Rudd's empty, lonely years. Perhaps the mother sold the daughter on the same views. Well, he would know as soon as he had a chance to talk to her.

But first there was something else to be taken care of—the little matter of twenty Hat cows, and the men who had two hundred dollars. Morry Seever and Orcutt. If they had stopped in Canyon, he would find them.

The slope was downward all the way to the lake and the buckskin chopped out the miles like a free-running ghost. Nearing the water, Ware thought how Hamp Rudd had prized it. Sunrise Lake, Rudd had called it and he had liked to stand in front of the ranchhouse and watch the first rays of the sun reflect up from it in a blaze of ruddy light.

The heart of the Hat range, that lake, the foundation upon which Rudd had built all the rest. With it he was a king. Without it, a pauper. He had liked to ride around it, watching Hat cows filing down the trails to drink, or graze across the marshy meadows. He had liked to linger by the tules along the shore, where the ruby-winged blackbirds spread their trilling like a thousand tiny silver bells. Where the beaches ran sandy he would listen to the haunting plaintiveness of the killdeer crying. And in the fall when the wild fowl spread curved wings against the sky, he would spend hours, watching.

The day before he died, Hamp Rudd had ridden a final circle around Sunrise Lake and then white and weary of face, had called Logan Ware to his bedside and told him what he must do. There had been certain documents drawn up and signed in Hamp's bold, but now shaky hand, and Doc Abbey had been called on to witness them.

"I can trust you, Logan," Hamp Rudd had said. "Yuh're the only one I'm shore of. Do yore best, boy. You know what my hopes were. If yuh can make 'em come true, where I couldn't, I know there'll be some kind of reward for yuh."

Logan Ware never failed to recall it all whenever he rode past Sunrise Lake.

So now the bleak mood of purpose deepened in him and held until the lights of Canyon lifted out of the blackness.

Ware drifted the buckskin to a stop opposite the end of the row of poplars which marked the east side of Lake Street. A full moon was crawling up through a tangle of summer clouds be-

yond the crest of Shaggy Mountain, but the poplars made the street a lane of ragged darkness which the yellow glow of lamplight seemed unable to probe. At the far end of the street the sprawling Valley House Hotel dominated the town.

Ware could hear nothing save the gusty breathing of the buckskin. Yet he swung his shoulders forward in instinctive challenge as his glance probed the night. Then he saw the slight shift of movement under the poplars in front of Jake Farwell's store.

With smooth swiftness Ware stepped from saddle. He gave the buckskin a slap on the flank and the horse obediently swung over to the hitch rail between the poplar trees.

LOGAN WARE heard a muttered curse that held a betraying hoarseness of tone, and the smile that pulled at his lips was mirthless. The skulker under the poplars no longer had him as a mounted target against the stars.

"Yuh should have made up yore mind, Frog," Ware said mockingly. "Mize Huncutt will give yuh thunder for muffin' this chance. But my patience has run out. Make it now, Frog—or get out of Long Valley for good!"

Ware had been moving in, using the buckskin as a shield. One long, swift stride carried him clear of the horse and close to the bole of a poplar. There he paused for a moment, silent.

Finally he said, "Still waitin', Frog? Why?"

Again sounded that hoarse curse, hard and strangled now, with fear and frustration. And words, heavy with hate.

"Yuh got somethin' ridin' on yore shoulder, Ware. Mebbe it's luck. Mebbe it's the ghost of Hamp Rudd. But it won't be there forever!"

Then the speaker was gone, heavy-footed through the night. Ware waited until he heard the creak of saddle leather, then the fading rattle of hoofs.

He stepped up on to the long, low porch of the store and had started along it when a door opened to let out yellow light. Then this light was blocked off by the burly figure of Mize Huncutt, who seemed to look and listen. Noiseless as a shadow, Ware flattened against the black wall.

"Any sign of him yet, Frog?" Huncutt called in guarded tones.

When there was no answer, Huncutt called again.

"Frog—hey, Frog!"

Nothing came back from the night and Huncutt cursed, stamped back through the door and closed it behind him. That door led to the law office of Tilton Bennett, which occupied one corner of the building, with two windows facing Lake Street and one facing the alley that ran the street at right angles. But the shades were drawn and Ware heard only an indistinguishable murmur of voices.

He went on, striding for the swinging half-doors of the Empire. He stepped through, put his shoulders to the wall and looked over the room. Morry Seever and Spade Orcutt were at a far table, playing stud with Tomlin, the house man, and two riders.

There was a cribbage board on a vacant table and Ware caught this up as he went by. It was of heavy, hard wood and Ware balanced it in spread fingers. Orcutt was on one side of the stud table, Seever on the other. Ware came up in back of Orcutt, who was reaching out to drag in the pot.

"I hope you and Seever have been winnin', Orcutt," Ware said. "For I want two hundred dollars."

Orcutt grunted, came half out of his chair, then settled back. Morry Seever's thin, dark face jerked up, and his eyes went blank. Seever had the quicker mind of the two, and the dead-

lier gun hand.

Spade Orcutt, heavy, shambling, blunt-featured, twisted his head and looked up.

"Oh hello, Ware," he blurted. "What yuh talkin' big money for? This ain't that kind of a game. Just a little stud, two-bit limit. Morry and me can't afford anything steeper."

Orcutt's clumsy babble wasn't fooling anybody, and Morry Seever, taut and watchful, knew it.

"What two hundred dollars yuh talkin' about, Ware?" Seever droned.

"Why," said Ware, "the two hundred dollars Ute Rhyde paid you and Orcutt for twenty head of—!"

Seever's chair squealed under the violence of the backward shove he gave it. And as he came lunging up his hands were a reaching blur as they stabbed toward his guns. That was when Ware threw the cribbage board.

The heavy wood caught Seever just above the left eye. There was spurt of crimson and he fell back across his chair which came down on the floor with a crash.

SPADE ORCUTT was slow-witted, and he had turned cow thief against the outfit he had worked for, but he was not a coward. He would have reached for his gun if Ware hadn't jerked the weapon from his clawing fingers while holding Orcutt trapped against the table by shoving his chair hard against his legs.

Ware tossed Orcutt's gun across the room, pulled the chair back.

"Two hundred dollars, Spade," he said. "That money belongs to the Hat. I'm takin' it from yuh."

He ripped a rigid forearm against the side of Orcutt's bull neck, staggering him. And when Orcutt, still reeling, tried to come around, Ware nailed him on the jaw with a punch that came up from his heels. Ware hammered him around the table, while Tomlin and the other two players scrambled and cursed as they tried to get out of the way. Dave Grande, who owned the Empire, stood watching, his pale face impassive, while Logan Ware chopped Spade Orcutt down.

It had been short, savage, and complete. Seever hadn't moved after hitting the floor. Orcutt was helpless. Ware stood over him, panting a little, blood trickling down his lips from the single clumsy blow Orcutt had landed.

"I ought to kill yuh," Ware rapped. "Any cow thief deserves that. And you and Seever are the lowest of the breed because yuh stole from the outfit yuh were ridin' for. Yeah, I ought to kill yuh, but I'm rememberin' once yuh were one of us. But I'm taking that two hundred dollars. Where is it?"

Orcutt fumbled a wad of crumpled bills from a pocket. Ware counted them.

"Only half," he said remorselessly. "Where's the rest?"

Orcutt nodded toward Morry Seever. In the pocket of Seever's shirt Ware found the other hundred.

He straightened and met Dave Grande's impassive stare.

"Two hundred dollars, Grande," said Ware. "For that they doublecrossed their own outfit. Anything yuh want to say about it?"

Dave Grande shook his head. "Not a thing. Yore cats, they were. You skinned 'em."

Ware nodded as he pocketed the money. "A word yuh can pass along, Grande. The Hat is just as tough as it was when Hamp Rudd was alive. If shootin' is called for, the Hat will be doin' its share."

Complete silence followed Logan Ware as he went out of the Empire into the night.

II

THE MEETING in Tilton Bennett's law office had begun to go a little flat. The issue had been gone over half a dozen times and no real answer could be reached, it seemed, until Logan Ware showed up. On this the girl was insistent, to the disgruntlement of the men present.

Mize Huncutt and "Dobe" Yarnell showed their impatience plainly, but Lister Beckwith and Tilton Bennett were more adept at masking their feelings. This, perhaps, was because Lister Beckwith was much the younger and he was watching the soft purity of the girl's profile with admiration, while Bennett, heavy and gross, had legal training and was used to delay.

Loren Rudd was in the gray traveling suit she had worn when she had stepped off the stage in Canyon the previous afternoon. There was a touch of dainty frilled white at the throat and wrists. Her hair was thick and heavy and tawny, and her eyes were clear gray. There was a sturdiness about her, though she was lithe and trim. Her face and throat were warm with soft sun-tan. A certain studied severity was in the expression of her mouth.

"There is no need of waiting further tonight, gentlemen," she said restlessly. "Logan Ware wasn't at the ranch when my message was delivered, and probably hasn't returned yet. We will have to wait until tomorrow and hope that he shows up then."

Dobe Yarnell cleared his throat. "Why wait for Ware at all? We know he won't agree. I say go ahead, draw up the rightful settlements according to law, and then let Ware make the best of it."

The girl shook her head. "No! You admit yourself, Mr. Yarnell, that Logan Ware would fight. And above all I want to head off further fighting. Enough

Ware hit Harmon a mighty blow and the man went backward over the hitch rail (Chap. V)

blood has been spilled through the history of the Hat Ranch. So it is necessary that I talk to him, Logan Ware, and make him understand my wishes."

"I'm afraid I must agree with Yarnell, Miss Rudd," Tilton Bennett said in his moist, thick voice. "I'm afraid you can do nothing with Ware."

Loran stood up. "But I will at least know that I have tried. Now I will say good night."

She had started for the door when a knock sounded.

Mize Huncutt opened it. Logan Ware stepped in. His mouth was slightly puffed and bruised. Somehow the dark spirit of the night clung to him, a turbulence that brought an uneasy stirring.

"Glad yuh showed up, Ware," Mize Huncutt said. "We been expectin' yuh."

"So I noticed when I first hit town," Ware said coldly. "Yuh had Frog Shefflin waitin' for me under the poplars. Yuh're a poor hand at pickin' tough ones, Huncutt. Frog just thought he was salty. When I told him to make it now, or clear out of Long Valley for good, he hit leather. If yuh don't quit throwin' these tinhorn gunfighters at me, I'm goin' to lose my patience and suggest yuh carry the smoke yoreself."

Crafty Mize Huncutt was not easily disconcerted. "What's Frog Shefflin got to do with it?" he said glibly.

Ware looked him up and down in contempt. "Yuh lie as clumsy as yuh scheme," he said flatly.

He turned and looked across the room at the girl.

"I'm Logan Ware, ma'am. Yuh're probably sick to death of this crowd. They pack a coyote smell. Shall we head back to the hotel? We can talk in private, there."

A BLAZE of anger crossed Lister Beckwith's darkly handsome face and brought Dobe Yarnell out of his chair. Ware laughed.

"If the lady wasn't present this would be a good time to settle things all around. Mebbe we could ask her to step outside."

"Please—everybody!" Tilton Bennett said. "Ware, Miss Rudd has certain things she wants to tell you. It was her suggestion we all be present. Suppose you let her have her say."

Ware swung his glance to the girl. She nodded.

Ware shrugged. "All right. I'm listenin'."

The harsh tone put a flush in her cheeks, built a slight blaze in her eyes. The rest settled back in their chair, but Logan Ware remained standing.

It was in that thick, tawny hair and her gray eyes, he thought, that the physical resemblance to her father was most apparent. Her lips puzzled him. They were soft and red and seemed fashioned for laughter and gaiety rather than their present disciplined severity. But she would be difficult to influence. Though her voice was strangely sweet when she spoke.

"Mr. Ware, I know that Hampton Rudd put great store in your integrity and faithfulness where his interests were concerned. There is something almost admirable in your continued faithfulness since his death. But the fact remains that in his will I was named his sole heir, and I wish to right certain injustices of years past. With your knowledge of the Hat range you can be of great help to me in clearing this up."

It's true, thought Ware. Her mother did sell her a foolish bill of goods and she intends to go through with it. "These so-called injustices, Miss Rudd —what are they?" he asked.

"Parts of the Hat range were stolen. I intend to return those portions to their rightful owners. I want no stolen acres."

"Suppose I told yuh there are no stolen acres in the Hat range?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't believe that."

Ware glanced around the room. The four other men were watching him with triumphant mockery in their eyes. "Yuh shore have been sold a phony bill of goods," Ware said softly. "Well, while I'm foreman of the Hat there won't be one inch, let alone one acre of range parcelled out to anybody, least of all to this crowd of slickery coyotes. That's the way it's goin' to have to be, Miss Rudd."

"In that case," she said evenly, "you leave me no choice but to discharge you. Effective now, you are no longer foreman of the Hat Ranch."

Lister Beckwith hit his feet, exclaiming triumphantly:

"Yuh hear what Miss Rudd says, Ware? Yuh're fired!"

"I guess yuh can leave now, Ware," put in Mize Huncutt. "Yuh're no longer concerned."

Ware laughed. "Nothin' I like better than to throw a jolt into you jiggers. The truth is, Miss Rudd can't fire me. I can prove that to her and I will—in private. There's a lot you hombres don't know. Not even Mr. Tilton Bennett, the fountain head of all legal wisdom. Do we have our little talk alone tonight, Miss Rudd—or tomorrow?"

She stared at him, her face a mirror of jumbled emotion. Preposterous as this big, rugged cowboy's words were, there was a ring of confidence in them. And in that instant Logan Ware saw that behind her determination, she was still a youngster, trying to handle a business affair so big that it frightened her. Ware could not help feeling sorry for her.

"It's really that way, Miss Rudd," he said. "I'd like you to believe I am more than anxious to help in any way that will benefit yore true interests."

FOR a long moment she stared into his eyes. Then she nodded. "Very well. We will talk this over, alone." Her glance swung around the room. "I'll see you other gentlemen—tomorrow, perhaps."

She moved over to the door and Ware opened it. He stepped out behind her, closed the door, took her arm. The moon had climbed high, making a silver river of the street. A night wind, coming down off Shaggy Mountain, crisped the air and brought the balsam scent of timber slopes.

"Yuh should see this moonlight on Sunrise Lake — yore lake," drawled Ware. "I've known yore father to sit up half the night, just lookin' at it."

She just quickened her step.

They were almost even with the last poplar when a single hoarse word whipped across the night.

"Ware!"

Logan Ware's reaction was catlike, explosive. He literally leaped for the shelter of that last poplar trunk, carrying the girl with him. The thrusting drive of his hand forced her close against the bole of the tree, just as a slug ripped into the tree, showering splinters of bark.

Beyond the hotel the blare of a gun had split the night, the flame blooming redly. But Ware had marked the spot and his gun was smashing out roaring echoes as he swung clear of the tree and raced for the spot from which that treacherous gun had flamed.

It roared again, and Ware slammed shots in return, searching the blackness with driving lead. He heard the hoarse gasp of a man hard hit, and the final gun flame came from close to the earth, with the lead flying wild. Then he was over the sprawled figure.

"Frog!" he gritted. "Yuh rotten whelp! Yuh could have hit that girl!"

"Frog" Shefflin was mumbling: "Rid-

in' on yore shoulder, Ware. Luck! For I missed yuh—every—shot!"

Then Frog's head rolled sideward and he was still.

For a moment the town of Canyon lay breathlessly silent. Then came the rush of startled, excited men, with shouted questions flying back and forth. "Stubby" Hoffmeyer, who owned the Valley House Hotel was first on the scene, running the length of the porch and vaulting the rail, with wheezing query.

"Where—where—who."

"Over here, Stubby," answered Ware harshly.

"Logan! You hit?"

"No, I'm all right. But Frog Shefflin—he's done."

Tilton Bennett's law office door slammed open and Mize Huncutt, Dobe Yarnell and Lister Beckwith arrived, with the paunchy lawyer trailing. The Empire bar completely emptied, with Dave Grande among the milling, pushing crowd.

Stubby Hoffmeyer finally made his voice heard.

"Frog's been makin' war talk for the past month, hintin' what he aimed to do. Looks like he climbed into a saddle too rough for him."

"He was waitin' under the poplars when I hit town tonight," said Ware. "I told him to get out of Long Valley. He left town, but sneaked back, hung back here in the shadows and opened up. I was seein' Miss Rudd to the hotel. He might have hit her. That's the story. Anybody want to question it?"

"I'm glad he didn't hit you, Logan," Stubby Hoffmeyer said.

One more of the few I can depend on, thought Logan. He said, "Thanks, Stubby," then headed back to that end poplar.

He found Loren Rudd crouched against the tree.

"I'm sorry yuh had to see that," he said.

Her voice was strained. "He—that man—he's dead? You—killed him?"

"That's the way it shapes up. Let's get out of here."

SHE moved mechanically, letting him guide her toward the hotel. She was trembling, and gave a gasp of relief when they entered the lighted hotel.

She tugged free of Ware's grip, looking at him with wide, shocked eyes in a pale face.

"You killed that man," she said again. "I saw you! You—killed him!"

"He would have killed me, if he could," reminded Ware. "He tried. He didn't miss you far."

This seemed lost on her. "You killed him," she said again, then whirled and ran for the stairway as though fleeing from a demon. There would be, Ware realized, no confidential talk with her this night.

Stubby Hoffmeyer came in, his bald head shining under the light of the hanging lamp. His round, rosy face was sober.

"Mize Huncutt is the one really responsible, Logan," he said bluntly.

Ware nodded. "I know. He's been sendin' Shefflin my way for a long time. Afraid to try it himself."

Stubby shook his head. "Not afraid, Logan—not exactly that. But Mize schemes. If possible, he never lets his right hand know what his left is doin'. Yuh think it is all worth it, boy?"

"What do yuh mean?"

"Tryin' to hold certain things together. Yuh'll get no thanks."

Ware shrugged. "A man leaves a trust with yuh, Stubby. Yuh do the best yuh can."

Ware went out and down the street, which had pretty well cleared and quieted. He got his buckskin and led it over to "Dub" Pennymaker's livery stable. Nobody was around so Ware took care of the bronc himself, unsad-

dling it and turning it into a box stall. He pulled a couple of armfuls of wild timothy from the hay chute and heaped it in the manger.

Ware cut back across the street, went down the alley past Tilton Bennett's now dark and silent law office then across the moonlit open beyond. Soon there was a picket fence and gate which he opened and went through. The cottage in front of him looked dark until he went down the walk beside it. Then there was light gleaming in a kitchen window.

Ware knocked softly on the door and it was opened by a slim, dark-haired, piquant-faced girl in gingham.

"Hello, Midge," said Ware. "Pretty late, I reckon. But I'd like to sit down for a minute or two with real folks."

"Don't be an idiot, Logan Ware," Midge Sutton said. "Early or late, it never makes any difference: You know that. Come on in. I'm sewing and Mother is getting ready to set some bread."

A beautiful setter dog, white with red-gold ears, pushed past the girl, tail waving, to thrust a moist and friendly nose into Ware's hand. Ware wrestled the handsome head gently from side to side.

"Speck," he murmured. "Old son-of-a-gun!"

The dog rumbled deep in its throat.

Beyond the kitchen table, capable hands and forearms white with flour, Mother Sutton said:

"He knew your step, Logan."

Ware settled wearily into a chair, dropping his hat on the floor beside him. The dog laid its head on his knee.

"Steve still over at Lockeford?" Ware asked.

"He'll be home tomorrow," Midge said. "His new double hitch of wagons has finally arrived from the East."

Ware looked at her. "Steve's lucky."

Midge colored. She had always been a shy, bird-like soul, yet with all a true woman's courage and understanding. As Midge Parks, an orphan, she had a tough row, running a little eating house. Her marriage to big, hearty Steve Sutton, who ran a freight route between Canyon and Lockeford, had always seemed to Logan Ware rich proof that there were things right with the world.

"I heard shots, Logan," Mother Sutton said quietly. "What were they about?"

MIDGE let her sewing drop in her lap while she watched Ware, noting the shadow in his eyes, his weariness.

"Frog Shefflin," he said dully.

"And you?" probed Mother Sutton.

Ware nodded, and Mother Sutton went at her bread mixing a trifle fiercely.

"Alive," she said tersely, "Hampton Rudd had his good points. Dead, I am not so sure. He left too much on your shoulders, Logan. It's grinding the youth out of you, throwing dangers at you not of your making. It will leave scars on you as long as you live."

"A man must do his job," said Ware somberly. "It was all Mize Huncutt's doing. He's been shovin' Shefflin at me for some time."

"That girl, Loren Rudd—she's in town, I hear," said Midge.

Ware nodded. "She was with me. Shefflin might have hit her. She's pretty bad upset. Can't blame her, I guess."

There was no further talk for the moment. These women possessed deep wisdom. They knew that it was not words which Logan Ware wanted at the moment. It was just to sit quietly in this bright, savory kitchen while the soothing balm of normalcy spread

across a raw wound to sooth and heal. They watched him become quieter, steadier. When his face softened, they were thankful. By the time coffee was ready he had climbed out of the pit of bitterness.

There were rich, golden-brown doughnuts to go with the coffee and as Ware bit into one he smiled at Mother Sutton. "Another reason why I hope you'll come out to the ranch," he said.

"Me?" Mother Sutton was startled. "What do you mean, Logan?"

Ware smiled. "To keep house for a while. I figger to be able to persuade Loren Rudd to come out. There will have to be another woman there, of course, somebody kind and understandin'—like you, Mother Sutton. And with Steve comin' home tomorrow, Midge won't be here alone."

"If you can get Loren Rudd into that Hat ranchhouse you'll be doing something her own father was never able to do," Mother Sutton said.

"More reason for you to say yuh'll come. Make it easier for me to persuade her." Ware laid some money on the table. "Two hundred dollars of honest Hat money," he said. "Proceeds of a sale of some Hat cows. Yore month's wages."

"Don't be foolish!" scolded Mother Sutton. "If I come it won't be for money."

"If you come it will be for money," Ware said calmly. "Yuh'll earn it, just makin' doughnuts."

He got up and went over to a little crockery jar on a kitchen shelf where he knew Mother Sutton kept her grocery money. He tucked the currency into the jar.

"I'll be by for yuh tomorrow mornin' with a spring wagon," he said. "Thanks for everything. You folks are good for a man's soul."

He picked up his hat, started for the door.

"And where are you going to sleep tonight?" demanded Mother Sutton.

Ware shrugged. "Dub Pennymaker's got a good hay loft. Won't be the first time I've bunked there."

"Not this night, you won't," said Mother Sutton firmly. "There's Steve's old bunk up in the attic. It's all made up. Go have a good sleep, Logan Ware."

When Ware turned in, Speck, the setter, settled down beside the bunk. Ware thought, weary as he was, that he would have trouble getting to sleep. Because before his closed eyes, flashed pictures of violent men, men dedicated to cupidity and scheming greed, men of much treachery and of some faith. And finally of roaring guns in the night, and of a man dying harshly with nothing to leave to the world except a railing at luck or at an inscrutable destiny.

But finally the stillness and security of the cottage did their work. The relaxation of sleep stole over him and his arm dropped down beside the bunk, his hand falling limply on the setter's shoulders in warm content.

III

LOGAN WARE waited outside the Valley House. The morning of a new day was cool and fresh. The poplar leaves shimmered, dew-washed and clean. The violence of the night before was as if it had never happened.

Stubby Hoffmeyer came out and murmured, "She just went in, Logan."

Ware tossed aside his cigarette, followed Stubby into the hotel, and to the dining room.

Loren Rudd was at a small table and had the room to herself. She did not look up until Ware stopped beside her.

"This is pure business, ma'am," he said. "The talk we have to have. Think of me as somebody yuh've never seen before."

Her head came up slowly and she looked at him from a grave and hostile distance. Ware had borrowed Steve Sutton's razor and, clean-shaven, the deep tanned leanness of his face stood out in stark, bold lines. Sound sleep had cleared his eyes, freshened him. You could, thought the girl, like him or hate him, but you could not ignore him.

"There is nothing I wish to talk to you about—ever," she said curtly.

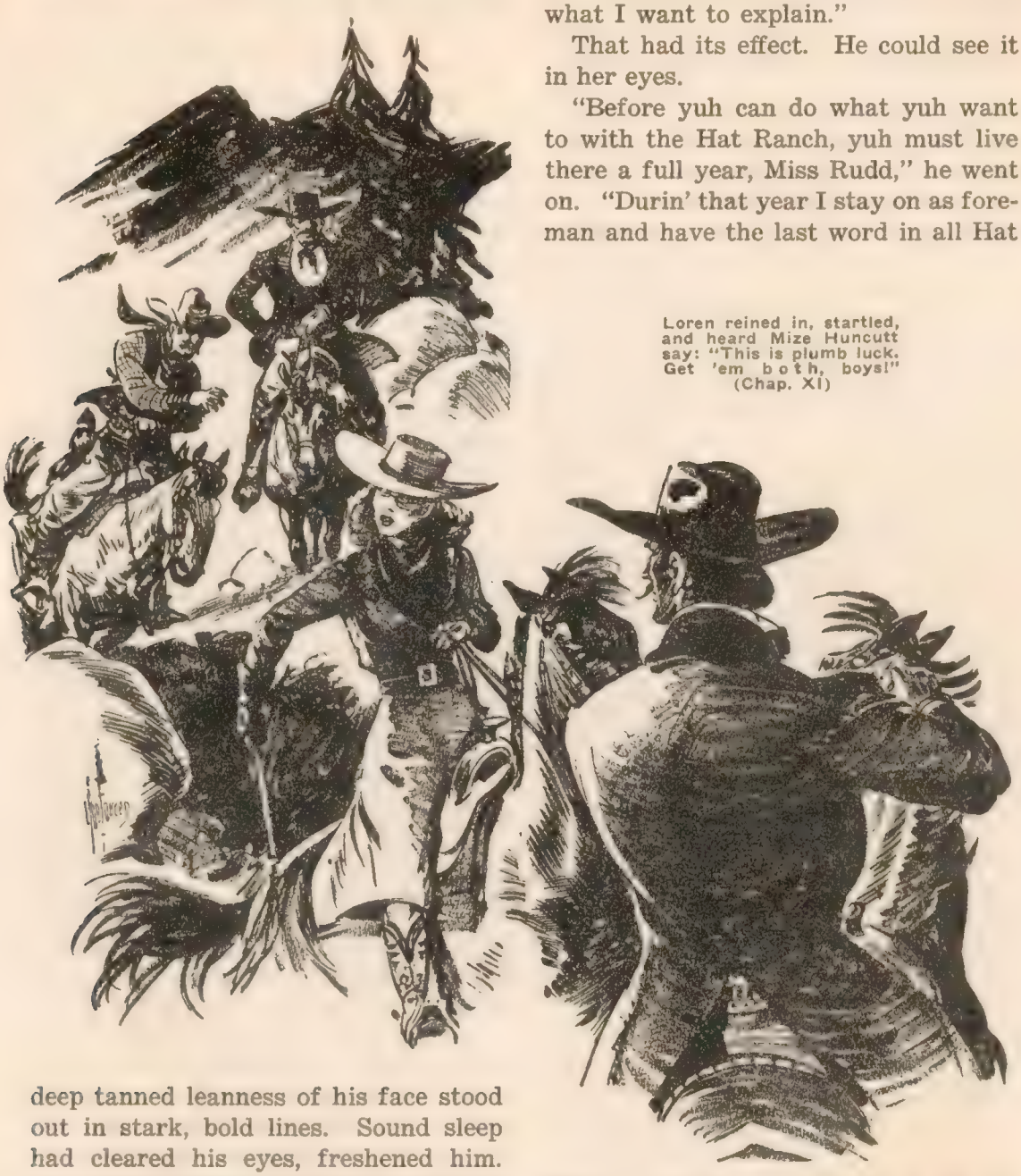
"There is if yuh expect to claim any part of yore inheritance," Ware told her quietly. He sat down and went on, "There's a proviso, signed at a later date and duly witnessed, which must be obeyed before the will is valid. That's what I want to explain."

That had its effect. He could see it in her eyes.

"Before yuh can do what yuh want to with the Hat Ranch, yuh must live there a full year, Miss Rudd," he went on. "Durin' that year I stay on as foreman and have the last word in all Hat affairs. I hope yuh'll see fit to do as that proviso says."

Color came into her face, the color of anger. "That is ridiculous! Mr. Bennett knows nothing about such a thing."

"There are several things Mr. Ben-



Loren reined in, startled, and heard Mize Huncutt say: "This is plumb luck. Get 'em both, boys!" (Chap. XI)

nett knows nothing about," Ware drawled drily. "The same goes for Mize Huncutt, Lister Beckwith and Dobe Yarnell."

"You can produce such a document?"

"I can and I will," Ware nodded. "When we get out to headquarters I'll let yuh read it."

"I have no intention of going out to Hat headquarters," she said stiffly. "Nor of living there for a year."

Ware leaned forward, held Loren Rudd's eyes with quiet intentness.

"Let's look at this thing fair and square," he said. "Yore father left yuh a ranch, almost a small empire. It is worth a lot of money. It's too big and valuable to risk losin' it. Whatever yuh do with it, when it is fully yores, is yore business. But until then, don't believe me, or Tilton Bennett, or Mize Huncutt or anybody else till yuh've had a chance to see what the Hat means. And the only way yuh can do that is to live there. Fair enough?"

"I'm remembering last night," she said flatly.

"So am I. And wishin' such things never had to happen. But last night has nothin' to do with yore future, while next year has everything. Despite me if yuh want to—that's yore business. But don't cut off yore nose to spite yore face. Yuh won't be alone out at the Hat. Mother Sutton is goin' to keep house for yuh. Yuh'll love Mother Sutton."

"But why should Hampton Rudd have drawn a proviso to his will?" she asked.

"Mebbe because he was a mighty wise man."

SILENCE fell between them, but as Loren went on eating, after a hesitation, Ware could see that she was turning over in her mind the startling information he had given her. That she resented the provisions of her father's will there could be no doubt, nor could there be any that she was at sea as to what to do.

"If," she said abruptly, "I refuse to comply with the provisions Hampton Rudd set up, what becomes of the ranch?"

"It becomes the joint property of the Hat crew who helped Hamp Rudd build it up. They can hold the ranch as pardners, or sell it and share the money."

"You are one of that crew?"

"Yes," Ware nodded.

"Then it would be to your advantage if I did not come out to the ranch to live. Why are you urging me to?"

Ware shrugged. "Because I want to see Hamp Rudd's hope come true. He wanted his daughter to own the ranch."

"I don't understand!" cried Loren. "It is all mixed up. You say Hampton Rudd wanted me to have the ranch, yet tell me I can't have it unless I comply with certain silly provisions not in the will."

"Not silly, but necessary," corrected Ware quietly.

"I won't do it! I'll go to Tilton Bennett and have him set the law to work. A will as stupid as that can be broken!"

Ware looked at her, a certain chill coming into his manner.

"Hamp Rudd got no thanks, and I've been told I'll get none. But I'm doin' this for Hamp—and for nobody else. You don't deserve the ranch, Miss Rudd —not one thin sliver of it. As far as Tilton Bennett is concerned, he's crooked as drunken snake and he won't get to start of the trail, let alone the end of it. I don't want to get rough, but if I have to, I will. All I have to do is just step aside and close my eyes and ears, and before Tilton Bennett can start breakin' the will, there won't be enough of Hat range and Hat cattle left to worry about. You'll get nothing which, it seems, is about what yuh deserve."

Her anger flared, but it bounced off him with no effect. Uncertainty gripped her. This cowboy with the smoky gray eyes and clean-cut jaw—there was a streak of granite in him. At times his words were quiet, almost gentle, but his purpose seemed unyielding. She felt helpless before his determination.

"What proof have I that if I do as you say—if I actually live at the Hat for a year—you will turn the ranch over to me then?" she demanded.

"The proof that I am out to fulfill the final wish of yore father. That is what he wanted, that is the way it will be."

"I—I will not be a prisoner? I will come and go as I wish?"

Logan Ware smiled slightly. "Of course. In fact, I think yuh'll enjoy bein' the mistress of the Hat. It is quite a ranchhouse Hamp Rudd built."

"Very well," she said grudgingly. "I'll do it. There seems to be nothing else I can do."

Ware pushed back his chair. "Say I give yuh half an hour. Will that be time enough for you to get ready?"

She nodded, also rising. Ware followed her out of the room. In the parlor Lister Beckwith was talking to Stubby Hoffmeyer. Lister Beckwith turned swiftly, smiling.

"Miss Rudd! I've been waitin' to see yuh. Bennett asked me to bring yuh over to his office. He's got some ideas he wants to discuss."

Loren hesitated. "Remember what I told yuh, ma'am," Logan Ware said. "Don't believe anybody. See for yoreself, first."

"That," said Stubby Hoffmeyer, "is about the soundest advice I ever listened to, ma'am."

LISTER BECKWITH turned angrily on the hotel keeper. "Any of yore mix?"

"This is my hotel," said Stubby. "In it I think what I please and say what I please. Them that don't like it, don't have to listen."

"There are developments I will talk over with you and Mr. Bennett later, Mr. Beckwith," Loren said. "Right now I am going out to the Hat."

She turned and went up the stairs. Lister Beckwith stared after her angrily, then stamped out. Logan Ware followed, grinning sardonically.

"When yuh tell one lie, Lister," he drawled, "why then yuh got to tell another one—quick! And after that some more, or the first one will get yuh by the neck and choke yuh. Yuh ain't thinkin' up fast enough."

Beckwith whirled, hate in his eyes. "Yuh're askin' for plenty, Ware," he rapped. "Keep on askin' and yuh'll be handed a chunk that'll burn yuh alive. Yuh got it in your head that folks are afraid of yuh. That's a big mistake. Just keep on tryin' to block justice and see where yuh end up at."

"When justice comes along, I'll step aside and take off my hat," said Ware. "But it won't be the crooked brand you and Bennett and Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell are tryin' to cook up. As for that chunk—well, any time yuh feel that good, Lister. Any time!"

"When I get ready to make my try," Beckwith said, "I won't make the mistake Huncutt did. I won't send anybody like Frog Shefflin."

Beckwith cut across the street to the Empire. Ware watched him until the swinging doors hid him, then headed for the lively barn.

He got Dub Pennymaker's spring wagon and a team of broncos, tied his buckskin behind the rig, then drove to the Sutton cottage. Mother Sutton was ready and he put her in the rear seat, loaded in her luggage and drove to the hotel.

Loren Rudd was ready. Ware introduced her to Mother Sutton, and stowed her luggage. Then, as she hesitated at

the high step of the spring wagon, Ware caught her by both elbows and tossed her lightly up to the front seat. She colored and stared straight ahead as Ware climbed up, picked up the reins and kicked off the brake. The broncs hit their collars with a lunge and went speeding down Lake Street.

In the Empire, Lister Beckwith and Dave Grande watched the rig pass. Beckwith poured out a flood of blistering curses.

"Yuh don't whip an hombre like Logan Ware by cussin' at him, Lister," Grande said, in his cold, emotionless way. "Yuh don't whip him by sickin' a fourth-rate gunfighter at him, like Huncutt did. Yonder rides as tough and able a man as I ever met up with. He won't fool easy, he won't whip easy, he won't kill easy. The man who pushes Ware off the driver's seat out at Hat, will have to be smarter, tougher and faster than he is. So far, I don't see anybody like that around."

"Yuh think yuh could do a better job than Mize or Dobe or me, mebbe?" flared Beckwith.

"So far I've left it to you others and seen nothin' done," said Dave Grande curtly. "So now I'm takin' over myself, and things will start movin. . . ."

FOR a cow country road, this wasn't a bad one. The team was full of run and the spring wagon spun briskly along. Lingering mists still clotted in the hollows where the sun had not yet reached. North and east the bulk of Red Mountain lifted, blue with distance. The air smelled sweet and fresh. There was just enough breeze to stipple the surface of Sunrise Lake with lipping waves.

Logan Ware pointed to the lake with his whip.

"Yores," he told Loren Rudd. "A mile wide and three miles long. The heart of yore range. There are men who would cut a hundred throats to own that lake and the grass its moisture feeds. Yuh were talkin' to four of 'em in Tilton Bennett's office last night."

"What has been stolen must be returned," the girl retorted. "Else I'll never be able to live with my own conscience."

"Then yuh'll part with none of yore legacy," said Ware. "For nothin' has been stolen.

"I do not wish to argue." Loren said crisply. "The truth speaks for itself."

Ware did not press the point, but reined to a halt where the road swept closest to the lake. Here, over a patch of tules and cat-tails, ruby-winged blackbirds swooped, taking off with a rush of wings, then swinging about to light again until every tule tip bent and waved.

"Ever hear silver bells chimin'?" asked Ware. Listen!"

The tinkling chorale of the birds made a ceaseless melody. A white crane angled across the sky on slow, measured wing beat, spotless against the morning blue.

Ware lifted higher in his seat, head swinging. Off around the curve of the lake shore came another sound, cutting through the tinkle of the blackbirds in a deep, hoarse undertone. Out there cattle were milling about some center attraction. Ware urged the team toward the spot.

"What is it, Logan?" asked Mother Sutton.

"Bull fight!"

Ware presently stopped the team, set the brake and handed the reins to Loren Rudd.

"Hold on to these for a couple of minutes."

He got down, untied the buckskin, and swung into saddle. He rode into the milling cattle, scattering them and closing in on the battlers, a pure-bred

whiteface Hat bull called Old Thunder, and a renegade that had drifted in. The renegade, a red roan, was rangy, bony, and with wide sweeping horns, and the faster on its feet. Those long, wicked horns had already got in some pretty savage work. Blood was dribbling down the sides of Old Thunder's neck and shoulders and foam was slavering from the whiteface's mouth.

Even as Ware approached, the renegade slithered away from the whiteface's stocky horns, whirled and lunged and barely missed driving a horn deep into the whiteface's flank. Old Thunder just did swing clear.

This fight could have but one ending if allowed to go on. In a test of pure strength the whiteface was easily superior. But the renegade was faster, shiftier and had more endurance. In the end it would sink one of those sweeping horns deep into the white dead bull.
face's vitals, and that would mean a

Ware spurred in close, trying to force the renegade away. But the red roan brute was wild with the fever of combat. It even made a short, sharp charge at the buckskin, which danced nervously clear.

There was only one thing to do. Ware drew his gun and fired. The renegade bull crumpled. Old Thunder stood there flanks heaving, a deep, growling bellow speaking his defiance.

Ware rode around the whiteface looking it over carefully. One of the bleeding horn gouges in the off shoulder could make trouble if the flies got into it. He looked down at the dead renegade. It carried no brand.

BACK at the wagon Ware tied the buckskin again, swung up to the seat and took the reins from Loren Rudd.

"You killed one of them," she accused "Now you leave it lay. Isn't that wasteful—and was it necessary?"

"I could have put in half the day chasing that renegade bull back a few miles," Ware answered. "But it would soon have been back for more trouble. The renegade is worth the price of its hide, no more. But the whiteface, is a pure-bred animal that cost Hamp Rudd around fifteen hundred dollars."

"Who does the renegade, as you call it, belong to?"

"Nobody. A maverick. Quite a few wild ones runnin' loose back in the Butcherknife Roughs. And they stay there unless somebody cuts one out and heads it down this way."

"Why would they do that?"

Ware shrugged. "Like I said, Old Thunder cost Hat a good fifteen hundred dollars. The renegade would have killed the big fellow if I hadn't taken a hand. Some people wouldn't weep any tears at seein' a prize Hat herd bull killed."

"Then there must be an awful lot of people who hate the Hat. With reason, no doubt."

"We got our enemies," admitted Ware drily. "Every big outfit has."

The wagon rolled on up the long slopes and the Hat headquarters came into view. The ranchhouse was built of a pale tan native stone, which had been hauled from Shaggy Mountain. It was Spanish style, low and spreading, built around a stone-flagged patio.

A lot of money and a lot of time had gone into the building. Some who had sneered and called it "Rudd's Folly." They knew the lonely hope which Hamp Rudd had put into the building and they had scoffed, but never to his face.

It had a rugged beauty and Loren gazed at it, wide-eyed.

"It's—amazing!" she stammered. "I had no idea—"

All the hope and all the loneliness in the world went into the buildin' of that ranchhouse," Ware said quietly.

"Hamp Rudd built it for you. If he could have lived to see yuh step across the threshold, he'd have died happy."

Loren bit her lip and scrambled down from the wagon before Ware could help her. Ware helped Mother Sutton down. "Give her time, Logan," the elder woman murmured. "She has much to unlearn."

Ware carried the luggage across the patio, swung open the big, solid, front door.

"The house can stand a lot in the way of furnishings," he said. "There's a limit to what a man can figgur out in that way. Take yore time and decide what yuh'll need to make it comfortable. I'll see that the things are brought in."

When Ware got back to the wagon he found Tex Fortune standing at the heads of the team.

"The boys are waitin' in the bunkhouse, kid. Some things they want to know."

Ware's eyes darkened. "Mainly, who?"

"Morlan, Kelsey and Trubee."

Ware nodded. "About as I expected."

Quiet tension was evident in the bunkhouse. Rainy Day and Packy Maroon were there, too, but whichever way Rainy went, that way would Packy go. And Ware felt pretty sure of Rainy. Ware looked the others over and spoke bluntly.

"What's on yore minds?"

Ed Morlan spoke up. "Where do we get off?"

"Meanin'?"

"Yuh've brought that girl out. We know she figgers to bust up the Hat. Me and Chain and Buck want our share. We figger we got more right to it than Huncutt and Beckwith and Yarnell."

"What makes yuh so shore Loren Rudd aims to bust up the Hat?"

"We been hearing talk ever since Hamp Rudd died. We know Hamp Rudd's wife had funny ideas—insisted that Hamp turn back to Huncutt and Yarnell and old Draw Beckwith, Lister's pa, range they claimed and she figgered belonged to 'em. When Hamp wouldn't do it, she left him."

WARE nodded.

"So far yuh got it pretty straight," he smiled.

"All right. Hamp's daughter was a baby when his wife left him. His wife never would let him see the girl and brought her up believin' Hamp was a cussed old range pirate. And she made the girl promise if she ever got her hands on the ranch, she'd turn back to Yarnell and Beckwith and Huncutt the parts they claimed Hamp stole from 'em. Well, Hamp's gone and his wife's gone and the girl's got the ranch. And they say she aims to do exactly what she promised. That's right, ain't it?"

Ware nodded again. "So what?"

"Why," growled Chain Kelsey, "if the girl's that anxious to throw away the Hat, we aim to help her. Like Ed says, figger we got more right to it than Yarnell and that crowd."

"And how would yuh go about that?"

"Sell the cattle off and split up the proceeds, for one thing," Chain said bluntly.

"Turn cow thieves with a vengeance, eh?" drawled Ware. "Be the same brand of coyotes as Yarnell and Beckwith and Huncutt—and Morry Seever and Spade Orcutt? No—there's things you boys don't know. But it's just as well I find out what yuh're thinkin'. I might have been dependin' on yuh in a tight, later on, and been let down when it would hurt. Get yore stuff together. I'll go make out yore time."

He turned to Rainy Day and Packy Maroon. "Those three just speakin' for themselves?"

"Just for themselves, Logan," Rainy nodded.

"Firin' Buck and Ed and me don't

mean yuh're movin' us off the earth, Ware," Chain Kelsey snarled. "We'll be around."

"Yore privilege," said Ware. "One thing yuh want to get good and solid in yore minds, though. A cow thief is a cow thief, even if he did ride for the Hat at one time. He'll be treated as such."

He turned to Rainy Day and Packy Maroon again. "A job for you boys. Take the spring wagon back to Dub Pennymaker's stable. Yuh'll need yore broncs to get back from town and to do a little chore down by the lake. A renegade bull mixed it with Old Thunder in a tough ruckus when I drove the ladies out from town. Old Thunder is cut up pretty bad. I shot the renegade. Do somethin' for the cuts on the whiteface to keep the flies away. Balsam oil will do. If yuh want to skin the renegade for smokin' money, go to it."

There was a small corner room of the ranchhouse with a door opening from the outside, which Hamp Rudd had used as an office. Logan Ware let himself in, sat down at the battered old desk and got out his time and check books. When he went out again and over to the corrals, Chain Kelsey, Ed Morlan and Buck Trubee were saddling. Packy Maroon and Rainy Day were driving off in the spring wagon, their saddled broncs jogging behind.

Ware handed over the three checks without a word.

"If yuh think by gettin' rid of us yuh're goin' to grab all the gravy, Ware —yuh won't," Chain Kelsey growled.

"Get gone and stay gone," ordered Ware bluntly.

He saw the rash flame in Kelsey's eyes, and for a moment Ware thougth Kelsey might go for his gun. Then Tex Fortune's voice came from the bunkhouse door, drawling but cold.

"Not today, Chain—I'm lookin' right down yore throat!"

Tex stood in an easy slouch, a Winchester rifle across his arm. Chain Kelsey cursed, stepped into saddle and spurred away. Ed Morlan and Buck Trubee, looking troubled, rode after him.

Ware walked over to Tex. "I'd like to have kept Morlan and Trubee," he said. "I've an idea that Kelsey persuaded 'em into somethin' they wasn't likin' too well at the end. And you, well—thanks!"

"Any man's a fool to get to likin' another man over well," Tex said. "If I had any sense I'd be feeling' like Kelsey does." Then he grinned, faintly embarrassed. "Four of us left, kid, where there used to be nine. And the Hat range just as big as ever, with just as many cows on it. We got a chore ahead—a plumb big chore."

IV

FOR the next ten days Logan Ware

[*Turn page*]

When Ron Davis, bred-in-the-bone cattleman who hates sheep, suddenly inherits a sheep ranch, it's the signal for a new flare-up of roaring rangeland war in—

THUNDER OVER DIABLO CANYON

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never laid an eye on Loren Rudd. With Tex and Rainy Day and Packy Maroon he virtually lived in the saddle, gone while the chill morning stars were still high and bright, and coming back after night had claimed the valley. The four of them systematically rode the farthermost limits of the range, drifting what cattle they found toward the heart of Hat grass.

As Ware had said, a lot of people were going to develop free and easy ideas toward Hat cows. The further the cattle were scattered, the easier it would be for these people to drift out a few here, a few there.

"A big raid," Ware said, "would be too much for us, short-handed like we are."

And so they rode and rode and grew lean and grim and weary. Ware and Tex spent three days out past Red Mountain, combing stragglers out of gulch and thicket and pushing them to safer ground. On their way home, Ware and Tex stopped off at Guenoc to buy a good feed of oats for their jaded and ribby broncs and a square meal for themselves.

Before the railroad pushed a feeder line as far as Lockeford, beyond Shaggy Mountain, Long Valley's only contact with the outside world had been by way of stage from Canyon to Harte City. Guenoc had been an important way station. Now stage travel between Harte City and Canyon had dropped to a single round trip a week and Guenoc had become pretty obscure. Some of the wilder spirits still liked to hang out there.

Ware and Tex Fortune, shaggy, unshaven and sun-blackened, cared for the broncs then had their own meal. It was too late to start for home, so they decided to lay over for the night. To kill time, they went into the saloon and stood watching a game of draw poker.

A couple of expressionless tinhorns were at the table, with "Black Tom" Gaddy and a couple of saddle hands. Gaddy owned the hotel and the saloon and his word was pretty much law in Guenoc. One of the saddle hands was lank, hatchet-faced, pale-eyed. Neither Ware or Tex had ever seen him before. The other was a sturdy youngster, curly-headed, open faced. And, Ware soon decided, the lamb in a den of wolves. The other four whip-sawed him almost contemptuously.

Tex nudged Logan Ware's arm.

"I know it's raw, but none of our pie," he murmured. "If that kid learns his lesson, mebbe it'll do him good."

Which was good logic, so Ware tried to feel indifferent. Then it became too raw. One of the tinhorns, dealing, fumbled the cards slightly.

"Wait a minute!" the kid said.

"We're waitin'," the dealer said then. "What's bitin' yuh?"

The kid felt the hostility. "I don't mind losin'," he said. "But the deal has to be clean."

"Meaning what?" demanded the tinhorn.

"I've lost on three kings," the kid said. "I've lost on three aces. I've lost on a high diamond flush, on queens full and even on four nines. The percentage don't run that way—unless it's framed. I had my suspicions. Now I know."

There was no mistaking the meaning of the glance Black Tom Gaddy threw at the tinhorns, and at the lank, hatchet-faced rider. The kid didn't have a ghost of a show unless he backed down abjectly.

"What do you know?" growled Gaddy.

The kid tensed, and that was when Logan Ware said:

"Why, he knows the game is crooked, Gaddy. The same as you do."

"All hands on the top of the table!" Tex said swiftly. "All hands!"

IT WAS one thing for Gaddy and his crooks to make this kid crawl or take a chance where he had none. It was something else to ignore these two Hat riders.

Black Tom spread grimy, thick-fingered paws on the table, the others followed.

"All tarnation hates a meddler," Gaddy snarled at Ware and Tex.

"And the world hates a crooked game and them who run it," retorted Ware. "How much they take yuh for?" he asked the kid.

"Around a hundred and fifty," admitted the young waddy.

"That's a lot of money to pay to find out yuh're a fool."

The young fellow flushed. "I've been a fool, all right."

"Get out of it while yuh still got yore clothes and yore skin. Write the rest off to experience."

The kid managed a wry grin. "With pleasure," he said. "And—thanks!"

He pocketed what money was left in front of him, and stood up.

"Mebbe some day," he said, "I'll meet you hombres where yuh're not ganged up. Then we'll see." He turned to Tex and Logan Ware. "I got enough left to buy you gents a drink. I'd like to."

"Better postpone that," Ware said drily. "I think a little jag of ridin' will be good for all three of us. Don't think I'd enjoy my night's sleep around here."

The three went out, Tex moving sideward so he could watch the four at the poker table.

The murky lights of Guenoc were fading behind Ware, Tex, and the kid, when Ware asked:

"Where, in particular?"

"With my stake shot to pieces, anywhere there's a ridin' job, I reckon," was the answer. "My name's Russell—Curly Russell."

"Ware here. Logan Ware. And Tex Fortune. How about fifty and found, more work than yuh've ever met up with before, and a fifty-fifty chance of gettin' a hole shot in yuh within the next six months?"

"Sounds interestin'," said "Curly" Russell. "No offense meant—but everything on the square?"

Ware liked this. "On the square. Yuh'll be ridin' for the Hat outfit."

Curly whistled softly. "Yuh're right about that even chance of pickin' up a slug."

"Yuh're new to this country," Ware said, "else yuh'd never have sat in one of Gaddy's sheep-shearin' games. But yuh know about the Hat?"

"Only this," said Curly. "I'm driftin', just taking a look-see at country I'd never been in before. I hit a little town called Aspen. I stop over for a meal then drop in at the store for some smokin'. A stage had just pulled in with the mail. A fellow drifts in. I knew I'd seen him somewheres before, but couldn't place him till I heard him ask if there was any mail for him. When he gave his name I had him placed. Maidlie—Slide Maidlie."

"Ah!" said Tex softly. "Tall jigger. Beaked nose and eyes cold enough to freeze a polar bear."

"Right!" exclaimed Curly. "Yuh know him?"

"Know of him," Tex nodded briefly. "Keep talkin'."

"Where I'd seen him before was at Larson Junction," said Curly. "I was with a shippin' herd brought in there to the railroad. There was a shootout, Maidlie against two others. They buried the other two. Well, here at Aspen there was a letter for Maidlie. He read it, then started askin' the storekeeper about the Hat outfit in Long Valley, how long a ride it was, and things like that. It was plain Maidlie figgered to head for these parts. So if things are shapin' up rough and Slide Maidlie is goin' to be around, somebody's shore to

stop a slug. Or will Maidlie be ridin' on our side?"

"Not that I know of," said Ware. "Guess yuh won't be interested in that job, now?"

CURLY RUSSELL nodded.

"I'm satisfied if you are," he said quietly.

"It's a deal," said Ware.

"Frog Shefflin wasn't good enough, Logan," Tex Fortune drawled, "so now they bring in Slide Maidlie. That will cost somebody money. But Maidlie is wicked enough with a gun to earn every cent of it. I met him once, before I started ridin' for the Hat. There's this about him, though. He won't try a Shefflin trick from the dark. When Maidlie calls a man it's a fair shake, and face to face. Our troubles ain't gettin' any less, Logan."

"We'll meet 'em, one by one," Ware said evenly.

They bedded down some ten miles from Guenoc and were up and silently riding again in the first gray dawnlight. It was mid-morning by the time they came in sight of the Hat, and when they finally came to a stop beside the corrals, two other riders came loping up along the town trail. One was Loren Rudd, the other Lister Beckwith.

"Enemy in camp," Tex murmured. "I'd plumb enjoy puttin' a knot in that jigger's tail and runnin' him off the edge of the earth. Say the word, Logan."

Ware shook his head. "Let me handle this. Make yourself at home, Curly."

Curly and Tex headed for the bunkhouse. Ware turned to watch the girl and Lister Beckwith. He was startled at the change in Loren Rudd. The ride had put blooming color in her face. Her hair had fallen loose across her shoulders and was pale copper in the sunlight. Laughter was on her lips. Her eyes were shining with sheer youthful exuberance.

As Beckwith and Loren reined in, Ware's expression was inscrutable, under the dust grime of travel and the dark shadow of unshaven beard.

Loren sobered slightly under the intentness of Ware's glance. She stepped from saddle, lithe and free moving in her divided skirt of tan corduroy. Her soft tan blouse was open at the throat.

"Lister invited me for a ride along the lake shore," she said, with a hint of self-defiance. "It was glorious."

Ware nodded. "The more yuh see of yore ranch, the better yuh'll like it. Want me to take care of yore bronc?"

"If you please."

She thanked Beckwith brightly and hurried to the ranchhouse. Ware swung his glance to Beckwith, who stirred uneasily in his saddle.

"Any reason why Loren and I shouldn't be friends?" Beckwith blurted.

"Her friends are her own affair," said Ware. "But don't abuse the hospitality of the Hat, Beckwith."

Beckwith colored. "I'm no spy! You and me don't see eye to eye on a certain proposition. I've never made any bones of how I feel about it. But I'm not a spy."

"One other thing," drawled Ware sardonically. "If yuh're Loren Rudd's friend, yuh won't be tryin' to rob her blind."

The color in Beckwith's face became an angry flush. "Yuh got a rough tongue, Ware."

Ware's smile was bleak. "I'm a rough hombre in a rough world, travelin' a rough trail. I never was mealy-mouthed. I know where I stand and I like to know where everybody else stands. Particularly fellows like you, Lister."

"Time will probably give you that answer," retorted Beckwith.

He swung his horse and rode away.

An hour later Logan Ware sat at the desk of the ranch office. He had shaved, had a bath and change of clothes. He

was entering Curly Russell's name in the time book when Loren Rudd came in. She, too, had changed, and looked fresh and cool in starched gingham.

"You promised to show me a certain document," she said.

Ware went over to a small, old-fashioned safe in one corner of the room. When he came back he handed her the provisional conditions governing Hamp Rudd's will, then went back to his work while she read. As she laid down the paper, Ware lifted his head and looked at her.

"Convinced?" he asked quietly.

She nodded reluctantly. "It would seem that my father did not trust my judgment very far."

"Yuh never gave him the chance to know yuh. It was the one thing he wanted above everything else. He clung to that hope up to the hour of his death. . . . Does it shape up as a hardship, havin' to spend the next year here at the Hat?"

"No," she admitted. "Not now. It isn't at all like I thought it would be. This ranchhouse—it's wonderful. There is so much that can be done with it."

"How do you like Mother Sutton?"

"She's sweet and kind. I love her already."

Ware smiled. "I knew yuh would. We'll all try and make yore year here enjoyable. Even—Lister Beckwith."

She colored and her chin tilted defiantly. "You said that I could come and go as I wished, that I could choose my own friends."

Ware nodded. "And I meant it. Only I'd hoped to be the one to show yuh around yore range."

She looked at him intently. "You are a strange person. I remember that—that night in town. And I see you as you are now. You could be two different people."

"This is the way I would like to be—always," Ware said. "That night in Canyon was the way I have to be, sometimes."

"You've been away a great deal since you brought me out here. Once or twice I've awakened in the early morning to hear hoofs pounding away. Then late at night there would be a light in the bunkhouse for a brief little time. Do you and the crew always work that hard?"

"We work accordin' to the needs of the ranch. It's a big one." He gave her rough dimensions measured in miles, and a tally of cattle that ran into thousands. "Yuh're a wealthy young lady," he ended. "How do yuh like Smoky Atwater?"

"The cook?" She laughed softly. "What a fierce-looking little man he is! The other day I was prowling around, just to get acquainted with the ranch and I stepped into the cookshack, as Mother Sutton called it. There Smoky was, scowling at me through his whiskers. I was frightened half to death."

Ware chuckled. "He didn't bite yore head off?"

"Not quite. But I thought he was going to. I apologized for intruding and started to leave. Gruff as a terrier barking, Smoky ordered me to sit down at the table, and he put in front of me an enormous wedge of fresh baked raisin pie. I ate every crumb. It was marvelous pie. While I ate, Smoky lectured me."

Ware laughed. "That's Smoky, all over. What did he lecture yuh about?"

"A great many things. Incidentally, Smoky is quite an admirer of yours. He was almost lyrical in your praise."

"At times he can be an old wind-bag," protested Ware hastily.

"In Smoky's opinion you are, 'the best doggone foreman and the squarest-shootin' feller in the whole consarned country.' "

"The windy old idiot!" growled Ware But he had to laugh, for the girl's mimi-

cry of Smoky had been perfect. She laughed with him.

ABRUPTLY both sobered, the girl in particular realizing that, hardly knowing how it had happened, barriers had been removed and that they were on a basis of reasonable friendship.

Loren stood up. "You were at work. I won't bother you any more."

"There's somethin' else I want to know," Ware told her quickly. "Have you and Mother Sutton decided on what the ranchhouse needs to make it more livable?"

"Yes. We made up a list."

"Get it. I'll have it freighted in from Lockeford."

The girl went out and Ware took a slow turn about the office, stopping at the window to stare out while he built a cigarette.

"Keep yore feet on the ground, Ware," he muttered. "She's as pretty as a sunrise—and just as blindin'. And you're goin' to have to be tough, plenty tough, before the year is done with."

Loren came back with the list. Ware glanced over it.

"It will cost quite a bit of money," she said dubiously.

Ware smiled. "I told yuh that yuh're wealthy. Hamp Rudd would have urged you to get three times as much. According to Hamp, money was made to buy the good things of life with. Only, he missed out pretty much on the good things."

Loren looked at him. "Why do you keep throwing that in my face all the time? As though it was my fault!"

"I'm sorry," apologized Ware. "I guess I've been pretty bitter. . . . About these furnishin's. Yuh'd probably like to pick 'em out yoreself. How about a little trip to Lockeford? I'll have Tex Fortune drive yuh in the buckboard. Yuh'd have to make a two-day trip of it, but yuh'd get what yuh want."

"I think I would like that."

"Keno! It'll mean a real early start tomorrow mornin'. And yuh'll need some money. Yuh might as well pay cash."

He got a checkbook from the safe, and wrote a check in four figures.

"They'll honor that at the Lockeford Merchantile Bank without question," he said.

The girl took the check, caught her breath. "I won't know what to do with it!"

"It's yores. Spend it. If it isn't enough, holler."

"My father certainly put great trust in you," said Loren Rudd slowly. "Maybe—Smoky is right."

She turned and hurried out. . . .

It was dark and chill. The stars were bright. The first hint of sunrise was hours away. The buckboard was ready.

"Why did yuh pick on me?" Tex was grumbling. "Why don't yuh send Rainy or Packy Maroon, or mebbe Curly Russell? They'd plumb enjoy a ride like this with a pretty girl. But an old cinder like me! What can I talk about to keep her interested? Why don't yuh go yoreself?"

Logan Ware smiled. "Do yuh good. Knock some of the onery crust off yuh. Besides, we need at least half a dozen more hands. While Loren is doin' her buying, you look around and see if yuh can line up some dependable men. There's generally quite a few punchers hangin' around the loadin' corrals at Lockeford, who've come in with shippin' herds, been paid off and took so much time celebratin' they've forgot to go back to their old outfits."

"Don't you forget there's a gent named Slide Maidlie who's drifted into Long Valley — and for a reason," growled Tex.

"I'm not forgettin' anything," said Ware.

Loren came from the ranchhouse. She

gave an excited laugh.

"It seems like the middle of the night. It's all like an adventure."

Ware helped her into the buckboard, tucked blankets around her. Tex was silent, dour.

"He's an onery old fossil—scared to death of a pretty girl," Ware said. "He'll thaw out after the sun comes up."

"Hold on a second," said a voice from the dark. It was Smoky, lugging a box from the cookshack. He put it in the back of the rig. "A little grub I fixed up for yuh, ma'am," he explained. "Them miles can be plenty long and make it quite a jump between meals."

"Thank you, Smoky. You are all—very kind."

TEX kicked off the brake and the team, dancing with eagerness, surged away.

The rattle of wheels faded.

"If'n Tex don't treat her proper I'll skin his ears," mumbled Smoky.

"I thought yuh was all set to hate her," drawled Ware, smiling.

"Who—me?" exploded Smoky. "I never said such in my life!"

"Seems to me I remember yuh sayin' she ought to be shook and shook till she got some sense into her silly head," teased Ware.

"If'n I did," snorted Smoky, "then it was me who didn't have no sense. I'm tellin' yuh, Logan Ware, there's one jim-dandy fine girl. You should of heard how she praised my raisin pie. Yes, sir! Should she ask me to go out and knock a mountain down, I'm goin' to spit on my hands and have me one bustin' good try at it."

"That's fine, Smoky" Ware's tone sobered. "But we can't forget that she came here with the idea of breakin' up the Hat and givin' it away. Far as I know, she hasn't changed her mind."

Ware had breakfast with Mother Sutton. "What do you think of her?" he asked.

"A lovely youngster," said Mother Sutton simply, "trying to figure out a problem that is pretty weighty for so young a head. Brought up to believe that her father was an old pirate. What an injustice!"

"Yuh think we can change her mind for her?"

Mother Sutton looked thoughtful. "I hope so. When she lets go, she just bubbles with the sheer joy of living. Then she seems to remember something, as though a nagging conscience is at work, and she goes quiet and gets that set, severe look about her mouth. It is going to take time for her to find the final answer, and she is going to have to find it herself, and in her own good time. . . ."

Ware set Rainy Day and Packy Maroon and Curly Russell to another day of line riding, then headed for town. He was restless with the feeling that big things were brewing against the welfare of the Hat.

Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell were not through. These were men whom Hamp Rudd, while alive, had had to hold at gun muzzle length through the years. That he had done so successfully was proof of the ruthlessness old Hamp could be capable of when he had to. Now Hamp was gone and the things he had held beyond the reach of Huncutt and Yarnell were still there. To imagine that Huncutt and Yarnell would lessen their efforts would be sheerest folly.

They had gambled that they could capitalize on the gullibility of a misguided girl. That would have been the easy way to get their hooks into the Hat. If, while waiting for such cards to fall, they could maneuver Ware out of the picture, so much the better. But should they sense that their gamble on the girl would not work, they would hit

hard in some other way. Of this Logan Ware was certain.

He was a little puzzled over Lister Beckwith. Lister's interests were with those of Huncutt and Yarnell, and his purpose identical. Old "Draw" Beckwith, Lister's father, had traded blows with Hamp Rudd, and had been whipped just as Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell had been whipped. Now Draw Beckwith was gone, and it was a question whether his purpose burned just as strongly in his son.

At times it seemed so. Yet Ware was thinking of yesterday, when Lister and Loren Rudd had come in from their ride. Lister wanted to be friends with the girl. Whether this was a means to an end, or whether it was actuated by her charm, was anybody's guess.

Also, when Ware had talked with young Beckwith, there had been in Lister's manner the hint of a desire for a truce, a slight backing away from outright enmity. It was, decided Ware, something he would have to think about.

There was something else he had to think about. "Slide" Maidlie.

WARE rode in to Canyon at a slow jog. Dub Pennymaker was hunched on a stool in front of his livery barn. His frayed and ancient straw hat was pulled low over his eyes. But this could not hide the fact that Dub's face was a swollen, bruised, purple and black caricature of the human countenance.

Logan Ware dismounted and walked over to Dub, letting his horse sidle on to the watering trough.

Dub looked up. His left eye was swollen shut, his right one bloodshot and barely open enough for him to see.

"Good glory, Dub—what happened to yuh?" exclaimed Ware.

Dub's thin shoulders lifted and fell in a slight shrug. He was a mild little man, with the years beginning to leave their mark on him.

"Fred Harmon," he mumbled, through lips swollen and cut.

"Fred Harmon! Why, he'd make two of yuh. When and why, Dub?"

"Last evenin'. I'm just waitin' till I can see better. Then I'll settle him."

Ware built a cigarette, his hands shaking a trifle from the anger beginning to burn in him. The gray of his eyes went smoky. Ordinarily, Dub Pennymaker wouldn't hurt a fly. He was cheerful, friendly and obliging. Out in the corral behind the stable were several broken-down horses, worth nothing to anyone. But Dub fed them and made his excuses to those who scoffed. Once he had awkwardly explained that when he got old and useless he hoped there'd be a friendly corral and a feed a day for him.

As Logan saw it, there was no conceivable excuse for anyone ever to give a man like Dub Pennymaker a beating.

"Yuh been to see Doc Abbey?" asked Ware.

Dub shrugged again. "I'm comin' along. Just lemme set here in the sun. I'm doin' all right."

"Yuh're not all right," Ware said bluntly. "Yuh're a sick man. I'm goin' after Doc Abbey."

"If Doc comes, he'll put me between blankets," mumbled Dub in protest. "And I got chores to do around this stable and broncs to be took care of."

"Those things will be taken care of, too," growled Ware. "Yuh darned game, decent little rooster."

Doc Abbey was a big, loose-framed, craggy-featured man. When he saw Dub Pennymaker's face he started to swear. He kept on swearing in a fierce, explosive sort of way when he and Logan Ware got Dub on the bunk in Dub's harness and saddle room and stripped the faded shirt from Dub's thin and ribby torso. Bruises as big as a man's spread hand splotched Dub's body.

"I'd like to have the one responsible for this on my operating table!" raged Doc. "I'd cut his heart out and choke him with it!"

V

A WARM, fly-buzzing gloom filled Dub Pennymaker's stable. Logan Ware toiled with hay fork, scraper and scoop shovel. He filled mangers, cleaned stalls and pushed Pennymaker's old wheelbarrow back and forth, dumping refuse. He led horses to the watering trough. At this chore he came finally to a roomy box stall, opened it and went in.

A clean-limbed, copper-red filly crowded the far wall, trembling, with wild rolling eye.

"Easy, Cherry—easy!" soothed Ware.

The behavior of the filly surprised him. He knew this horse well. The apple of Dub Pennymaker's eye, she was. The one horse in Dub's stable which he would neither loan or rent to anyone. It was Dub's greatest pride and joy to cinch a light racing pad on the filly and take her out for her exercise runs. After which he would spend hours brushing and rubbing her down. Always before, when Ware had been in the stable, the pretty animal would have an eager head over the side of the stall, whickering softly for attention.

When Ware got close enough to the filly to lay a hand on her shoulder, she seemed to cower. Ware kept up a soothing murmur, then the gentle sweep of his hand ran across the animal's flank, stopped here, the filly flinching.

The usually sleek flank was rough, welted, feverish. A dry crust was there and a cloud of flies buzzed about Ware's hand.

Ware put a halter on the filly, led the nervous animal out to where the light was better. He swore with a cold, bleak anger. The filly had been as savagely spurred as any horse he had ever seen. Both flanks were torn and gouged, smeared with dried blood. And there were slanting welts where a squirt had been used mercilessly.

Ware tied the animal to a wall ring and went up to the harness room. Doc Abbey was just leaving.

"I got the poor little devil quieted down," murmured Doc. "Gave him something to make him sleep. Dub's a sick man, sick inside over something that's hurting him worse than the beating he took. I tried to get him to talk, but he wouldn't give me a hint. I'd like to know who did that to him."

"Fred Harmon," said Ware.

"Fred Harmon!" exploded Doc. "It would be somebody like that hulking, pea-brained gorilla! I'm going to tell that whelp what I think of him and if he tries to get rough with me I'll brain him! But why would he have done this to Dub?"

"I think I know, Doc," said Ware. "Come here. As for Harmon, he'll be taken care of."

Doc did some more swearing when he saw the little filly. Then he and Ware got to work. With clean, cool water the mangled flanks were gently sponged and cleansed. Doc smeared a cooling, healing ointment on them.

"That," he said, "will do the job, as well as keep the flies away."

Hoofs sounded at the wide, main door of the stable. A big, rangy line-backed dun horse was there, the rider just dismounting.

Logan Ware marked the easy, confident way in which the dun paced at its rider's shoulder, and the appearance of that rider. A tall man, erect. Low on his right leg, the butt flaring wide above the open-topped holster, a big, black gun.

"Want to board my bronc for a spell," the stranger said. "The best the stable affords." His tone was deep, crisp.

"Shore," said Ware. "Four bits a day."

"Here's ten days in advance." The stranger handed over a five-dollar bill, turning slightly, and Ware glimpsed a profile that was beaked, fierce as that of a bird of prey.

What Curly Russell had said clicked in Ware's brain. And he knew that here before him stood Slide Maidlie, gunman, who was being brought into Long Valley for one express purpose—to kill Logan Ware!

WARE was startled when the gunman swore harshly. Slide Maidlie was staring at the sorrel filly's flank.

"Who did that?" he demanded. "What low-down whelp would do that to a good hoss ought to be whipped half to death."

Doc Abbey, who knew nothing of Slide Maidlie, his reputation or dread purpose in Long Valley, answered.

"A local character, with instincts not a jump above those of something swinging by its tail to a jungle tree. I'm not a fighting man, but I'm liable to make a try at it should I meet up with that individual before I've had time to cool off."

Doc marched off, bristling.

"Leave the dun here," Ware said to Slide Maidlie. "I'll take care of it as soon as I've finished with the filly."

He led the filly back to the box stall. The pretty animal had ceased its shivering, its wild-eyed terror. The gentle ministrations of Ware and Doc Abbey seemed to have restored its confidence in mankind.

Slide Maidlie was gone when Ware returned. The dun stood quietly and Ware unsaddled it, put it in an empty stall, brought oats, and filled the manger with hay. Then he went to the harness room and looked in.

Whatever Doc Abbey had given Dub Pennymaker to make him sleep, it had not yet taken effect. Dub rolled his head and mumbled:

"Come here, Logan."

Ware stood over the bunk and said, "I just took care of Cherry, Dub. Doc and I fixed up those torn flanks. In a week Cherry will be as good as ever. That's what this was all about, wasn't it?"

Dub nodded. "Harmon's been tryin' to trade me out of Cherry for a long time. Yesterday afternoon I drop over to the Empire for a beer. Harmon's there, liquored up. He starts in the same old argument. I tell him Cherry ain't up for sale or trade or rent. He gets to swearin' that some day he'll ride that bronc. I get a little warm under the collar and tell him that, knowin' the way he manhandles any bronc, I'd shoot Cherry before I'd see him put a saddle on her. Then I went to supper. I come back to the stable and set about my evenin' chores. I get around to Cherry's stall and Cherry ain't there."

Drowsiness was inching up on Dub.

"Yeah," he went on, "Cherry's gone. Looked like mebbe she's nosed the latch loose and got out. I look around but can't find her. Then, at dusk, here she comes into the stable with Harmon ridin'. He steps off, laughin', sayin, he's made good his brag to ride my bronc. He said he wasn't interested in no trade any more, that Cherry wasn't bronc enough for him. I see the shape Cherry's in and I guess I go for him. I didn't have much chance—" Dub's voice trailed off.

"I get it, Dub," Ware said quietly. "Now forget it and go to sleep. Cherry ain't hurt permanent."

But Dub droned thickly on:

"Harmon gives me what for. When I'm down he puts the boots to me, plumb enjoyin' himself. I go plumb out. When I come to, it's night. I manage to get the saddle off Cherry and her into her stall. Then I pass out again.

It's mornin' when I get straightened out some. I make it outside, figgerin' if I set in the sun I'll get so I can go in and tend to Cherry. Then you come along. Thanks, Logan, thanks—"

Dub couldn't say any more. Doc Abbey's sleeping potion finally got control.

Ware stopped in at Jake Farwell's store and casually asked, "Seen Fred Harmon around, Jake?"

Jake shook his bald head. "Not today. He was in town yesterday, him and Milo Kron. What yuh interested in Flat Y hands for? They ain't ridin' on yore side."

I KNOW," Ware said. "But sometimes it pays to know more about them ridin' against yuh than with yuh."

He went out, stood in the shade of the poplars and built a smoke. His thoughts were running along two trails. Fred Harmon and—Slide Maidlie!

Harmon was just one of Dobe Yarnell's hands who, because of the pure brute in him, had thrust an incident across the trail which set the cold fires of anger burning in Ware. But Maidlie?

The gunman was a deadly actuality. Something had to be done about Slide Maidlie, and quickly. But what? The obvious answer was to finish him, quick! But that was a set-up from which Ware had a normal shrinking.

Ware had never fancied himself as a gun fighter, nor had he any wish to be one. He carried a gun, as all men did in Long Valley. He used it when he had to, to keep on living. But he alone knew the black, numbing mood which had come down upon him after each affair. A shooting seemed to leave a smirch on a man's soul that was slow in being erased.

Still, maybe he was good enough to shade Slide Maidlie in an even break showdown. If he wasn't, it would all be over swiftly, and the trust which Hamp Rudd had placed in him would be thrown away. If he should shade Maidlie, then that black mood would settle and another invisible scar would be there.

He looked at the sky, swept with sunshine, and wondered about a man's destiny. A man set out to blaze a trail and follow it. But life threw this and that at him until the trail was so cluttered it was hardly visible any more and heaped high with mockery and strange frustrations.

Thinking these kind of thoughts got a man nowhere. Regardless of the why and how and wherefore of everything, a man had to act when confronted by problems which only action could solve.

Ware threw aside the butt of his cigarette and stalked down the street. A measured coldness seeped through him. You couldn't postpone some things, not with profit. There were challenges you couldn't dodge, regardless of the outcome. Slide Maidlie was such a challenge.

Ware found Maidlie in the Empire. The gunman was at the bar, listening impassively while Dave Grande talked. A cold flicker shone for a second in Dave Grande's black eyes at sight of Logan Ware. Then he set another glass on the bar and pushed a bottle beside it.

"On the house, Ware," he said. "Have one."

Ware nodded. "A short one. Thanks!"

"Shake hands with Slide Maidlie," Grande said. "Slide, this is Logan Ware."

Ware felt the impact of the gunman's blizzard-chilled glance as though Maidlie were examining him in the minutest detail.

But Maidlie's handshake was quick, firm, strong.

"How's the little filly?" he said.

Ware tipped the bottle, barely covering the bottom of his glass. "Be good as new in a week. That dun of yours is

a nice bronc. Whickered like an eager pup when I poured him some grain."

Maidlie chuckled. "Cougar's a big baby. Sorry I took you for the stable roustabout. Where was the feller who owned the stable?"

"Laid out on a bunk in the harness room, all beat to pieces. The same feller who worked out on the filly, worked out on him. I just took over to help out a friend."

"Guess I'm not up on the latest news," put in Dave Grande. "Yuh mean Dub Pennymaker ran foul of some trouble?"

"Put it that he ran foul of a coyote," answered Ware.

The sound of approaching hoofs came from the street outside. Then the clash of spur chains. Two riders came in, the leader swinging the doors wide with a heavy-handed push. Logan Ware, his glass halfway to his lips, put it down and came around.

SIGHT of Fred Harmon brought back all of the furious anger Ware had known when he had first beheld the wreck of Dub Pennymaker's face and had heard who was responsible. And he was remembering the fear-stricken little filly with the savagely torn flanks. He forgot all about Slide Maidlie. He hardly realized how his gun got in the hand he stabbed toward Harmon's thick body.

"Yuh can stop right there, Harmon!" he rapped. "Take yore gun-belt off and lay it aside. Now!"

Harmon's thick lower lip sagged in startled bewilderment.

"You loco, Ware?" he blurted. "What's pinchin' yuh, anyhow?"

"I'm thinkin' of Dub Pennymaker, all beat up. A man two-thirds yore size and near twice yore age, Harmon. Then I'm thinking about that little Cherry bronc, Dub's pride and joy, all ripped and spurred and bloody."

"You mean, Ware," came Slide Maidlie's voice, "that there stands the hombre who cut the filly's flanks to pieces?"

"There he stands," Ware said grimly. "Sweet specimen, eh? You heard me, Harmon! Unbuckle yore gun-belt and get rid of it. Then I take mine off and you and me step out into the street."

"This," said Slide Maidlie, "I'm going to enjoy." His voice went frosty. "You with the crooked jaw, if yuh got ideas of sidin' yore pug-ugly friend—don't!"

Milo Kron took one look at Maidlie's eyes. "I'm not packin' any gun," he said.

Fred Harmon seemed to have finally got the import of things through a bullet head and was not at all averse to the prospect. He had a lot of confidence in the weight of his fists and in his rough-and-tumble ability. He jerked loose his belt and let it and the gun drop on a chair. He backed through the half doors and Ware followed, laying his gun on a poker table.

The moment Ware emerged, Harmon made his rush, both fists clubbing. One missed, as Ware ducked, the other bounced on the side of Ware's head, knocking his hat off, staggering him.

Ware dived in close, driving a shoulder into the pit of Harmon's stomach, almost lifting Harmon off his feet as he pulled him back against the hitch-rail, which, catching Harmon just at the hips, made him waver wildly, momentarily off-balance. That was when Ware stepped back and hit him.

The blow drove Harmon's head back, brought a smear of blood to his mouth. Ware hit him twice more, a left and a right, the last a solid, lifting smash. Harmon went backward over the hitch rail, legs waving. He landed flat on his back in the dust of the street, but recovered swiftly and was up on one knee as Ware ducked under the rail to follow up his advantage.

It was a careless move on Ware's

part, for it brought his unprotected face within the reach of Harmon who swung a punch while still on one knee.

The blow crashed under Ware's left eye and he felt as if he had been kicked by a horse. It dropped him to hands and knees and Harmon, reaching out a clawing hand, caught Ware by the shoulder and dragged him close, bringing in another short, chopping blow to Ware's face. Then he threw his whole weight on Ware, driving him back and down.

A numbness seemed to freeze Ware all through and he was dazed. Instinct alone made him push both hands up, grab Harmon's jaw with hard, gripping fingers and push the man's head back. Ware's rigid arms shielded his own face and jaw in large part and Harmon's mauling blows for the moment were wild, and not too damaging.

The respite was short, but it was enough to let Ware's head clear somewhat and lessen the numbness that clogged his muscles. Harmon left off trying to pound a fist home, instead grabbing at Ware's wrists to drag that clamping grip off his face. Ware put all his strength into a sideward push and it threw Harmon off him. Ware rolled the other way, lurched to his feet.

GETTING back to his feet did things for Ware. The desperation he had felt when Harmon had him down, left him. A calculated coolness of thought came back to him. Strength flowed back into his legs and when Harmon came at him, raging furiously, Ware sidestepped the rush, and caught Harman as he turned.

He rifled a fist to the angle of Harmon's jaw, just under the ear. The punch shook Harmon up badly. Ware followed him up and spun him around with another to the same spot.

Ware followed Harmon mercilessly, hitting like a machine. There was no tautness to his muscles, now. He snapped his blows in like free-sliding pistons.

But Harmon was tough, with that sodden toughness common to men with a lot of brute in them. He was thick and heavy and solid. Though dazed and foggy and clumsy he kept pawing back and there was still danger in his blows.

Ware was oblivious to everything but the man in front of him. He did not see or hear Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell as they came riding down the street, with Morry Seever and Spade Orcutt following. He did not see the hot light which sprang into their eyes, nor the significant glances they traded, nor the way they maneuvered their horses until they had formed a rough square about him and his opponent. He saw nothing but the bleeding bulk of Fred Harmon, and he kept on winging punches in a bitter, all-consuming purpose to batter Harmon into the dust.

His fists and wrists felt numb from the battering shock of repeated impact. He thought he never would get this burly brute down. But there was a limit to what even Harmon could take. When he did break, he caved all over. He did not fall violently, but seemed just to crumple and sink, and Ware no longer had a target for his aching, weary fists.

Ware's own legs were trembling. He spread his feet to steady himself, rocking on the balls of his feet. Breath came from his throat with a raw, salty rasping. He dragged a shirted arm across his face, wiping away some of the blood which smeared it. He blinked his eyes against the sting of sweat, stared down at Fred Harmon.

"I reckon," he mumbled through battered lips, "that Dub Pennymaker will rest a little easier now, Harmon."

Ware turned toward the Empire. That was when Dobe Yarnell said:

"Just a minute, Ware! Where yuh

think yuh're goin'?"

Ware looked around. He saw Yarnell and Mize Huncutt, Morry Seever and Spade Orcutt. Seever had a plaster over his eye and his face was venomous.

Cold shock ran through Ware, clearing his eyes. He saw the purpose in these four men, saw it climbing toward the explosion point. They had him cold.

He didn't even have a gun. But that wouldn't stop them. Here, in one moment they could eliminate the one big obstacle which stood in the path of their purpose against the Hat Ranch. With him dead, Hat resistance would inevitably crumple. And the way things were in Long Valley at the moment, Yarnell and Huncutt could bluster their way out of a cold-blooded killing.

Morry Seever and Spade Orcutt hated him. They wanted him for purely personal reasons. And while Dobe Yarnell and Mize Huncutt also hated him, their main feeling would be material gain. They had to get him out of the way to make a conquest of the Hat.

They were no longer sure of their chance of success by preying on Loren's Rudd's sincere but misguided theories concerning the ranch. She was living at the Hat where her ideas might change. So this was a golden opportunity.

WARE could see this going through their minds, saw their decision form. Something came up inside him, some white and deathless flame. His shoulders straightened, his head came up and from his battered lips burst his defiance.

"You yellow cowards!"

Behind Ware sounded a deep, cold voice.

"Good kid! That's tellin' 'em!"

The next moment Slide Maidlie stood beside Ware. Under the gunman's beaked nose his lips had pulled thin with contempt. His eyes were their iciest.

"Now then," he taunted deliberately, "what was it yuh was figgerin' on doin'? Maidlie's the name—Slide Maidlie."

The look of consternation which leaped into the eyes of Dobe Yarnell and Mize Huncutt was almost ludicrous. Spade Orcutt grunted as though struck a blow. Morry Seever's hands, which had been shifting restlessly, grew still, crossed on his saddle-horn.

Slide Maidlie dropped his left hand on Ware's shoulder.

"Come on," he said distinctly. "Yuh need some wet towels on yore face and a slug of liquor under yore belt."

After the fury of combat and the deadly threat that had momentarily stalked the street outside, it seemed cool and almost restful in the Empire. It was good to sag back in a chair and hold a wet cold towel against a bruised mouth and face. For a time reaction held a man weak and heavy, but then the deep wells of a man's strength began replenishing themselves and he could stir to activity again.

Logan Ware laid aside the final towel, buckled on his gun, brushed dust from his hat and donned it. He and Slide Maidlie and Dave Grande had the Empire to themselves. Dobe Yarnell and Mize Huncutt had not come into the place at all. They had set Milo Kron and Orcutt and Seever to the task of boosting Fred Harmon into a saddle, then all of them had ridden out of town. They'd had to hold Harmon in his saddle.

Ware held out his hand to Slide Maidlie, looked at him steadily through swollen lids.

"Thanks, Maidlie," he said. "I'm not shore I didn't make a fool of myself. I got a way out on a limb and it was creakin' bad when you stepped in and got me off it. I owe yuh plenty for that."

"Yuh went out on that limb for a friend, didn't yuh?" Maidlie said, his handshake quick and firm. "Well, that justified it. "Yuh don't owe me a thing. Good luck!"

Ware went out. Maidlie stared after him, cold eyes narrowed and inscrutable.

"Yuh could have saved a lot of people a lot of trouble if yuh'd stayed out of that, Maidlie," Dave Grande said.

The gunman looked at Grande, who flushed.

"A man like me," said Maidlie coldly, "makes few friends. But every now and then I run across a man I like. And I like Logan Ware. The proposition yuh offered me? I'm not interested."

He stalked out of the saloon, a tall man, very erect, hawk-faced and formidable.

Dave Grande stared at the doors and cursed. And in his hard black eyes a red glint flickered.

VI

BEHIND a string of steadily plodding mules a pair of big new Merivale freight wagons turned into the lower end of Lake Street and rolled ponderously up to Jake Farwell's store. The bells of the leaders of the team tinkled a cheerful cadence.

Up on the box Steve Sutton balanced, his raw-boned shoulders swaying easily to the lurch of the lead wagon, jerk-line in one hand, brake strap in the other. As he swept his freight outfit to a deft stop, he called cheerfully:

"Hi, cowboy! Why all the heavy thought?"

Logan Ware looked up. "Hello, Steve."

Steve stared and exclaimed, "Holy smoke! What yuh been pushin' yore face against?"

Logan Ware shrugged. "Did yuh pass Tex Fortune and Loren Rudd along the road?"

"Yeah," said Steve, swinging down across a wheel. "I wondered about that. The girl fed up with ranch life already and pullin' out?"

Ware shook his head. "Goin' to Lockeford to order a flock of furnishin's for the ranchhouse. It will be yore chore to haul 'em in, next trip."

"Yuh still haven't said what hit yuh," Steve said. "Man! Have you got a pair of shiners, with other signs of conflict. If yuh got licked, don't be too proud to admit it."

A bleak smile touched Ware's battered lips.

"I came too close for comfort. When do yuh figger to make yore next trip out?"

"First of the week. Why?"

"Then you can do Dub Pennymaker's chores for two or three days. By that time he'll be in shape to handle things himself."

"What happened to Dub?" demanded Steve.

Ware told him and Steve swore. "And so yuh gave Harmon a dose of his own medicine? I'd like to have seen that. But you don't care how much misery yuh pile up for yoreself, do yuh? He'll be layin' for yuh."

"A lot of people are layin' for me," Ware said drily. "One more or less don't matter."

"How's Mother doin' out at the Hat?"

"Enjoyin' herself, I think. Why don't you and Midge come out for a visit?"

"We'll do that, one of these days," promised Steve. "How are things with Huncutt and Yarnell and that crowd?"

"Quiet, right now. But liable to break wide open at any time."

Ware crossed to the stable and looked in on Dub, who was deep in sleep. Even so, Dub twitched and whimpered, his battered nerves not fully quieted. As Ware went after his horse, he told him-

self he was glad he had evened up for Dub.

He thought about the whole thing as he rode out of town. In some ways it had been a fool play. Yet there were times when the anger piled up in a man to a point where cold-blooded judgment didn't mean a thing.

As far as incurring Fred Harmon's undying enmity, he would have had that anyhow, for Harmon was one of Dobe Yarnell's bully boys. But in the fury of the fight he had let Yarnell and Huncutt ride up and get him hopelessly cornered. Which wasn't so good. Neither was the fact that Morry Seever and Spade Orcutt were now riding with Huncutt and Yarnell. Well, coyotes ran with coyotes.

The biggest item of importance was the stand Slide Maidlie had taken. That had been a surprise, and a mighty welcome one. Ware realized he owed his life to Maidlie, the gunman who had been brought into Long Valley for the express purpose of making good where "Frog" Shefflin had failed, and who had stepped in and sided him. He, Logan Ware, was alive right now because Maidlie had done this. It was something to make a man wonder.

IT MIGHT just have been a whim of Maidlie's for the purpose of heightening his bargaining power with Huncutt and Yarnell, a reasonable move on the part of a professional gunfighter, whose guns were for hire to the highest bidder.

There was no question but that Slide Maidlie was a cold and deadly proposition, yet Logan Ware had to admit to a strange liking for the man. In Maidlie's crisp, firm handshake and in the directness of his icy eyes, was a certain self-respect and adherence to principle. None of the coarse, treacherous brute, like in Frog Shefflin. But whatever the purpose behind Maidlie's actions, there was never any telling about a professional gunfighter.

Back at the ranch, Ware cleaned up the marks of conflict as best he could, then went to the office for a few hours of good, solid work. He had not had too much chance to get the ranch records up to date, what with the press of outside work.

Hamp Rudd had put great store in keeping a written record of all of the Hat's affairs. It had been Hamp's contention that more than one ranch had gone on the rocks because of careless bookkeeping. If a man did not keep proper records, he had claimed, then he didn't know where he was going. Shrewd business sense was not the least of the reasons why Hamp Rudd had built the Hat up into the outfit it was.

Ware had been at the desk for a good two hours when he heard buckboard wheels. Ware looked out the window to see none other than Tilton Bennett, the lawyer, rein up his team and heave his gross bulk ponderously to the ground. Ware went out and stood on the office door step. Bennett came over, an almost jovial look on his heavy-jowled face.

"I was hoping to find you here, Ware, but afraid I wouldn't. Mind if I come in?"

Ware stepped aside. "Not at all."

The lawyer sank into a chair, wheezing.

"What's on yore mind?" Ware said briefly.

"Mainly a talk with you and Miss Rudd."

"It'll have to be with me alone. Miss Rudd is not here."

"You mean—she's gone back to Harte City?"

"No. Just to Lockeford. She should be back tomorrow evenin'. But I'm listenin'."

Bennett got out a black cheroot and lighted it.

"I thought you might be interested to know that I have decided not to represent Huncutt and Yarnell and Beckwith in their claims against the Hat." He cocked an eye to measure the effect of these words on Logan Ware.

But Ware was poker-faced. "Interestin'. Why?"

"My position has been strictly professional. I don't hold with violence. I told Huncutt and Yarnell and Beckwith that, when I first agreed to represent them. They promised to abide strictly by the law. That promise was not kept. The Frog Shefflin affair was proof of such. I feel that I am released of my commitments to Huncutt and the others."

"I see," said Ware. "That's what yuh wanted Miss Rudd to know?"

"In part—in part."

The lawyer puffed furiously at his cheroot, and seemed to be searching carefully for words.

"I am glad of this opportunity to speak to you alone," he went on with apparent caution. "Er—Miss Rudd might not understand. In refusing to represent Huncutt and Yarnell and Beckwith, I am forfeiting a sizable retainer fee. I am not in business for my health. I feel that if I were retained by Hat interests in opposition to the claims of Huncutt and those others, my services can be of considerable value." Bennett took the cheroot from his lips and held it out, staring at it, giving the impression that he was waiting almost breathlessly for Ware's answer.

WARE'S expression became even more inscrutable.

"That," he agreed, "could be."

"Exactly!" exclaimed Bennett. "I'm sure of it. In addition I now possess information advantageous to the Hat's cause."

"I can see how yuh would have," murmured Ware.

"Then it is a deal?" Bennett could not entirely conceal his eagerness.

"I'll have to talk it over with Miss Rudd," Ware told him. "I'll let yuh know."

"I have undergone a change of opinion on certain matters," Bennett said sententiously. "After carefully considering the matter I am now of the opinion that it would be folly for Miss Rudd to part with any portion of her inheritance without full monetary consideration."

"That has always been my opinion," Ware said crisply.

Bennett beamed. "I would not like to see Miss Rudd's interests jeopardized. She is a lovely girl."

"Yeah," Ware nodded. "Lovely."

Bennett heaved his bulk from the chair. "I am disappointed in not finding her here. You will inform her of the purpose of my visit?"

"I'll tell her."

Ware stood in the office door, watching Tilton Bennett drive away. Then Ware spat, as though to relieve his mouth of some foul taste. . . .

Just at sundown the following day, Tex Fortune rolled the Hat buckboard to a stop at the corrals. Logan Ware went over to meet it. Loren Rudd scrambled down before he could offer an aiding hand. She was dusty and tired but happy-looking.

"Have a good spree?" asked Ware, smiling.

"A spending one!" exclaimed the girl. "I'm afraid I've been horribly extravagant. But it is partly Tex's fault. He encouraged me."

"He would," drawled Ware. "He's an irresponsible jigger."

"That so!" snorted Tex. "Me, I know how to give a young lady a good time."

The girl was staring at Ware's face, her expression sobering. "There's been —trouble?"

"Not too much. I stopped a couple

of fists. Got some news for yuh. Can I see yuh after supper?"

"Why, of course. The trouble—what was it?"

"I took a swing at an hombre I didn't like. He swung back. That's all. I'm glad yuh had a good time."

She hurried off to the ranchhouse and Tex began unhitching the buckboard team.

"All right," he said. "Whose fists did yuh stop, and why?"

Ware told him, and Tex swore. "You can been the dang'dest fool. Borrowin' more trouble when yuh're gettin' round-shouldered now from the load yuh're packin'."

"If you'd seen Dub Pennymaker and the way that sorrel filly had been mishandled, yuh'd have done the same," Ware retorted. "I met Slide Maidlie."

"I hope yuh didn't spit in his eye."

Ware told the rest of the story and Tex whistled in stark amazement.

"And Maidlie sided yuh? I will be hanged! That could mean that Maidlie and whoever sent for him, couldn't come to terms."

"Could be. . . . Have any luck picking up new hands?"

"Got a couple. Brothers. Joe and Speck Larribee. I kind of liked the looks of 'em. They'll be in some time tomorrow."

"We can shore use 'em, for Morry and Spade have gone over to the Huncutt crowd. Chances are that Chain Kelsey and Ed Morlan and Buck Trubee will end up in the same corral."

"If we could just get Slide Maidlie on our side!" growled Tex. "He'd be worth a dozen like 'em!"

"I wouldn't hire him on a straight gunfighter deal," said Ware. "He'd have to chouse cows, and I doubt he'd care for that."

"Don't be so proud," said Tex bluntly. "If yuh can get him, take him on any deal he wants to name. Unless all signs fail, chousin' cows is going to be of mighty little importance right soon, while fightin' for the Hat and our own skins is goin' to be the big chore. If yuh can get Maidlie—get him. Before he ties in on the other side and gets you."

AFTER supper Ware strolled out to the edge of the little benchland on which the ranchhouse stood, and looked down across the valley. The night had settled in, warm and still; the black void of the valley seemed steeped in peace. But Ware well knew what was brewing out there, and that this thing could never be settled amicably. Tides were running, dark and devious ones, driven by the hates and greed of men, and the end would be written in gunsmoke.

A light step sounded behind him and Ware turned. It was Loren.

"There is a queer restlessness in me," she said. "What is the news you have for me?"

Ware told her about Bennett's visit, and what the lawyer had to offer. She was startled.

"I don't understand. Does what Mr. Bennett said about me parting with none of my ranch mean he dosn't believe the claims of Yarnell and Huncutt and Lister Beckwith are legitimate?"

"They're not, and never were," said Ware.

"Yet my mother—"

"It's somethin' I've waited to explain," cut in Ware. "You weren't in the frame of mind to listen before. Now I think yuh are. It's like this. There's no question but that yore mother was sincere in her beliefs, and in what she told yuh about yore father and this Hat Ranch. But she was wrong. Yuh understand I mean no disrespect when I say that?"

"I understand. Go on." Loren's voice was muffled.

"Look at Long Valley as it was when Hamp Rudd first came here. It was open range, then. A wild, tough wilderness. He saw its cattle possibilities. Particularly for a ranch built around Sunrise Lake. Other men saw the same thing. Mize Huncutt, Dobe Yarnell, old Draw Beckwith, Lister's father. In a setup like that, the lake and surroundin' range would go to the man strong enough and tough enough to take it and hold it against all comers. He didn't steal any range. He just met other men in an open fight for it, and he whipped 'em. If he had lost, then they might have taken all of what makes up the Hat range today."

"Mother didn't see it that way," argued Loren. "She saw dark days of fighting and brawling. Ruthless and savage days. She saw dead riders brought in across their saddles. She saw my father come in smeared with his own blood. She said that life was one long nightmare, and when she begged my father to change his ways he would not. So she left him."

"Hamp Rudd told me about your mother," said Ware softly. "A gentlewoman, born and raised in the East under sheltered conditions. She was on her way by stage to visit relatives in California. There was a storm and the stage skidded off the road and smashed a wheel in a ditch. Hamp Rudd offered the hospitality of his ranch to the passengers. He fell in love with yore mother. There was a whirlwind courtship, and yore mother married Hamp Rudd. It wasn't long before the hard realities of a raw frontier struck her. She couldn't understand the accepted rules of the game as they were fought by her husband—and others."

"Could she be blamed?"

"No. But she could have been mistaken. And she was. Hamp Rudd never blamed her. He loved her, always. He built the ranchhouse in the hope that some day she would come back to him. In time he realized she never would. But there was still his daughter. So then he hoped that you might some day come to him. And he kept on buildin' up the Hat in that hope. He was a product of his time, Hamp Rudd was. Unchangeable in his hates, unswerving in his loyalties. Ruthless when he had to be, but gentle in many strange ways. But never a range pirate. Just a man who built and hung on to what he built."

"But—but—how could my mother have judged him so wrong, if things were like you say?"

"Because she didn't understand the rules of the West. Some of 'em have never changed. You unfortunately met up with one of 'em that night in Canyon. Kill or be killed. It was Frog Shefflin—or me. Yuh understand that now, don't yuh?"

SHE was silent for an interval.

Then she said, hesitatingly, "—I think I do. . . . About Mr. Bennett—what made him change his mind, I wonder?"

"Tilton Bennett," drawled Ware, "is a shyster, pure and simple. He was with Huncutt and the others when he thought he saw a chance to profit. Then he found out there were things he didn't know about. You came out to the Hat to live. There was a likelihood of yore changin' yore mind about a lot of things. So Bennett quick got on the other side of the fence and he's willin' to trade the secrets of Huncutt and the rest to us for money. I wouldn't trust Bennett out of my sight."

She laughed a little hesitantly. "I guess there are a number of things I'll have to change my mind about. You must give me time. I asked Tex Fortune questions during our trip. He answered—some of them. He is another of your admirers."

"Tex will do to take along," said Ware.

He looked down at her. Her head was tipped back. She seemed to be looking at the stars. Their reflected glow laid a thin highlight of silver along her profile and the faultless curve of her throat. She felt the impact of his glance, turned her head.

"You haven't told me the full story behind those bruises on your face, Logan Ware. And I insist on knowing."

"Why bother? Let's talk about other things. You, for instance."

"We've been talking about me. There isn't anything more to be said."

"Oh, yes, there is. Lots of things. Such as—do yuh know how lovely yuh are, Loren Rudd?"

She was no coquette. She was honestly startled at Ware's tone and words. "I know nothing of the sort! I'm afraid the starlight has made you slightly addled. We'd better go back to the ranchhouse."

She was turning away when Ware said sharply:

"Wait!"

He wasn't looking at her now. His attention was all for the dark slope below them. Down there hoofs were clicking, coming closer at a slow jog. Two horses.

"On second thought," Ware said, "Yuh'd better not wait. Scatter along."

Perversely, she stood her ground.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Don't know," was the curt reply. "Which is why I want you to skedaddle. Hurry up!"

"No!"

Ware had no time to argue. The hoofs were close now. He stepped well apart from Loren, then challenged crisply:

"Who's ridin'?"

Bit chains jangled as horses were reined in. A drawling, but alert voice said:

"Is this the Hat Ranch?"

"That's right."

"Then Speck and me have come to the right place. This is Joe and Speck Larribee. We were told we'd find ridin' jobs here. We didn't expect to show up until tomorrow, but decided we might as well drift in early."

"Fine! I'm Logan Ware."

"Yuh're the man we was to report to. Looks like this might turn out to be excitin' country."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Well, things are boilin' down in that town of Canyon. When Speck and me came through the town was all worked up over a killin' that had just taken place. One of these lawyer fellers. Bennett, the name was. Somebody took a pot shot at him through the window of his office, while he was settin' at his desk. And they didn't miss."

VII

JOE AND SPECK LARRIBEE were tall and lean, thin-faced and leathery. Logan Ware liked the looks of them as he sat across the table from them and watched them wolf the meal Smoky Atwater had rustled up.

"I wouldn't try and misrepresent things," Ware told them. "What happened in Canyon this evenin' is just another grain of powder leadin' to a real blow-up. Ridin' for the Hat is going to be a rough trail."

Joe Larribee shrugged. "Tex Fortune told Speck and me the same thing, which didn't worry us none, or we wouldn't be here. So long as the outfit we ride for is a clean one, Speck and me will take our chances with the rest."

"Mebbe," said Speck, "yuh got an answer as to why that lawyer hombre was gunned."

"Mebbe it's just a guess, of course. But a doublecross has killed more men than one."

"I see," mumbled Speck.

When the Larribees got through eating, Ware took them to the bunkhouse and introduced them to the rest of the crew. Tex, of course, they knew.

Ware went over to the office and began entering the Larribees in the time book. The inner door opened and Loren came in. She was pale.

She said, "Do you think Mr. Bennett was killed because—because—"

"Shore," said Ware. "Because he was all set to doublecross the crowd he'd been playin' with. They knew he was crooked, and didn't want him peddlin' secrets. There was only one way of being shore he didn't."

"It—it's terrible!"

"And just the start," Ware said grimly. "From here on, anything can happen."

"It hasn't changed," she wailed. "It's just like it was in Mother's day—this country! It is cruel and brutal. I hate it—all of it. I don't want this ranch. It was built on blood and brutality. On killing and being killed. I hate it!"

"Tonight, yes," observed Ware. "Tomorrow, when the sun comes up, yuh'll feel different. The Hat didn't kill Tilton Bennett. His own crooked greed killed him."

She dabbed at the tears in her eyes in a pathetically little-girl way.

"Go in and tell it to Mother Sutton," said Ware kindly. "Yuh'll feel better then."

She blinked, her soft lips quivering. "There's ruthlessness in you, too," she charged. "You are hard as stone. You are like Hamp Rudd must have been."

"If I am," murmured Ware, "I'm a lot of man. Run along and let Mother Sutton comfort yuh. . . ."

Hours later, in the black dark of early morning, Logan Ware awoke. He heard Tex Fortune stirring, also. "Tex!" he called softly. "Hear it?"

"I hear it," answered Tex. "Down by the lake, I think."

Ware padded on bare feet to the door, opened it, and listened. The sound was clear now. The complaining bawl of cattle being chivvied in the dark. Tex was right. Something was doing, down at the lake.

Ware dived for his clothes. He brought the bunkhouse fully awake with a harsh yell.

"Everybody up and out! Somethin' wrong at the lake!"

Ware was first at the corrals, first to catch and saddle in the dark. Horses were rearing and snorting, men muttering and growling. But they were practiced hands, all, and soon, with Ware in the lead, they went roaring down the valley slope. The night was a black mystery, the air rushing against their faces moist and chill. Their horses, running full out, ate up distance.

WARE knew each roll of the slope, its extent and direction. Unerringly he drove straight for the lake. Little groups of cattle scuttled out of the way of straining horses. Ordinarily these cattle would be bedding quietly for the night. Now something had set them to moving.

Above the rumble of hoofs, the creak and rattle of gear, the moaning rumble of harried cattle lifted. It seemed to center mainly to the left and Ware swung that way, coming in at the north side of the lake at a long angle. Then, thin and shrill through the night, came a warning yell.

Ahead a gun winked red, a report rumbled, and in the charging group Packy Maroon swore.

"My bronc's hit!"

Staggering and lurching, Packy's horse began dropping behind. That gun winked again, and a second joined it. Then Ware and Tex Fortune began shooting back. Again that yell lifted, taunting now, and then came a final flicker of gun flame. Then empty dark,

with only that desperate bellowing of cattle left.

Ware charged ahead another couple of hundred yards, found nothing, so reined to a plunging halt, bringing the others to a stop with him. To the east, already faint with distance, speeding hoofs were fading in the night.

Tex would have spurred after them, but Ware held him back.

"No good, Tex—not in this dark. They can't have cattle ahead of them, movin' that fast. The deviltry they were up to is right here on the mud flat. I think I know what it is. Come on!"

He raced down to the lake shore, pulled up again. Now, their eyes adjusted to the dark, they could make out the pale sheen of water, jeweled with star reflections. They saw something else. In the water were dark bulks. Some loomed high and large, other flat and smaller. Some of those bulks stirred and floundered, others lay still. Across the water came that moaning bellowing, with a strange note of helplessness in it.

"Our drift fence," gritted Ware. "They've cut it and stampeded cows out into the mud. Some of 'em are down already. We got to move fast or we'll lose 'em. Two men stay on shore with the horses. The rest of us go out there. Tie riatas together — we'll need the length. Hustle, everybody!"

Then Ware was out of the saddle and wading into the shallow water and the deep, treacherous mud beneath.

This was the only bad stretch of swamp along all of the lake's shoreline. All else was firm enough to allow a cow or horse to wade out to drink. But here an ancient adobe flat was seemingly bottomless mud. Any horse or cow that ventured out here was hopelessly bogged, unless man came to its aid.

For this reason Hamp Rudd had built a stout barbwire fence skirting this stretch of shoreline, walling it off from venturing cattle. Now this fence had been cut, and cattle driven through into the mud. Some Hat cows would die this night.

"Tackle the down ones first!" yelled Ware. "They'll drown if yuh don't!"

The lank figure of Joe Larribee came splashing and floundering up to Ware. Joe had hold of a riata end, dragging it over his shoulder. Together they seized the nearest down animal, dropped the riata loop over its horns.

"All right, Speck!" Joe yelled, "set up on the pull!"

Out on the shore, Speck Larribee threw a dally with the other end of the rope about his saddle-horn, set his horse to taking up the slack, then as the rope lifted taut, leaned his horse into a steady pull.

Out in the dark and the water and the mud, Logan Ware and Joe Larribee lifted and tugged at the bogged cow, yelling and swearing, twisting its tail. The cow began to struggle and the mud gave grudgingly. The stout cow pony under Speck redoubled its efforts. The mud gave up the fight and the cow went slithering and skidding toward the shore.

JOE followed to bring back the rope. Ware singled out the next critter to be rescued. Tex Fortune and Rainy Day were struggling with one, while on the shore Curly Russell was setting his bronc to the pull. A yell of satisfaction by Tex signaled a victory.

"Two saved," thought Ware, "but we'll never get 'em all out."

They tried. They tried desperately. They labored without let-up. They slipped and slid and floundered. They fell, got up, and fell again. They pulled and lifted until muscles were strained to the breaking point. They were soaked with water and sweat. They were caked and smeared with mud.

They fought on doggedly. Breath burned in their lungs, sobbed in their throats. No longer did they have breath to signal a victory yell. They croaked their calls to the riders on shore to set up the pulls.

Long since had Packy Maroon, his horse dropping dead back there in the dark, come panting up on foot, to plunge in unhesitating and bend his back to the killing toil. But they got cows out of that death pit. Not all of them. Some they could not stir. Some were dead when they got to them, drowned. But they saved a dozen where they lost one.

The world was growing light with a new dawn as they got the last critter safe to dry land. One by one they staggered up out of the mud, dropped stupidly on solid earth to get some of the rest for which their tortured muscles cried.

"All but seven, Logan," mumbled Tex. "That's my count."

"Better than I thought we'd do," Ware agreed.

Joe Larribee was scraping and rubbing his hands on the grass of the lake shore, trying to free them of mud and slime. Mixed with that was blood, where a horn had gouged or a rope had burned.

"Lend me yore smokin', Speck," croaked Joe.

Speck handed it over, but Joe couldn't roll one. Speck quietly spun a smoke into shape for his brother.

"When I told yuh the trail would get rough, Joe," Ware said, "I didn't expect to throw a sample of it at yuh the first night in camp."

Joe inhaled deeply. "It's all right. Now Speck and me know the breed of coyotes we're up against. Nothin' like learning that early. We'll get in our licks and we'll make 'em good. If a man's got it in for me, I say let him take his grudge out on me, personal—but not on some poor dumb critter that can't fight back. It takes a low whelp to do that."

Right then and there Logan Ware knew that Joe and Speck Larribee would do to take along. They'd see this through, come what might.

"Somebody will have to stick around to guard this cut fence," said Packy Maroon. "I'll do that while you fellers get back and come down later with some more wire and tools. My hoss is done for, anyhow."

"Yuh're not stayin'," cut in Curly Russell. "I am. Yuh're soakin' wet. All I did was saddle work. Take my bronc home, Packy. I'll stick around here."

Curly slid free the rifle that hung in the scabbard under his stirrup leather.

"Any more funny business around here and somebody gets shot."

Ware thought, "Curly will do, too. We'll be a tight little outfit, after all."

They climbed stiffly into saddles, hunched shoulders against the chill of wet clothes and dawn air, headed up the long slope.

Curly stared after them.

"All my life," he muttered, "I been wantin' to tie in with an outfit that carried a real layer of salt under its hide. Now I found one and here I stay."

The approaching sun was piling up blinding light behind the gaunt bulk of Shaggy Mountain by the time Ware and his weary crew rode up to headquarters. They unsaddled, turned their horses into the corrals and headed for the bunkhouse.

WARE glanced up at the ranchhouse and saw Loren standing on the office step. He went to meet her. He knew he was a mess, mud and slime from head to foot, and he smiled grimly at the question in her eyes.

"When I scour this off yuh'll be able to recognize me again," he said.

"What happened?" she asked. "It

seemed like the middle of the night when I woke up. There was some confusion, then a wild racing of hoofs. I knew something was wrong, and I never slept a wink waiting for you men to get home. What was it?"

Ware told her, bluntly crisp. "We got all the cattle out but seven. And we lost one bronc. It's been a night that's cost the Hat some money—and some sleep. It could have been worse. If we'd been an hour later gettin' at the job of rescue, we'd have lost nearer fifty cows."

He was startled at the anger that flamed in her eyes. "What a cowardly, inhuman trick!" she cried. "Deliberately driving poor dumb brutes out to die in mud and water. What kind of men would do such a thing?"

"The kind we got hittin' against us," Ware said swiftly. "Without principle, without conscience. Nice people—Mize Huncutt, Dobe Yarnell, and others. This night is somethin' for yuh to remember when yuh're tryin' to make up yore mind about certain things."

"None of our riders—were hurt?"

"No."

Ware hunched his shoulders against the clammy wetness of his shirt. She was swiftly contrite.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be selfish, keeping you standing here. Hurry and get some dry clothes on."

He nodded. "I don't mind the wet, but this mud is somethin'."

She watched him stride off to the bunkhouse, and thought that some men would have been ludicrous, in all that smear of mud. But Logan Ware just looked more the man, strong and sure. She went slowly back into the ranchhouse, thinking about this cattle empire her father had built, and of the country he had built it in, and of the men who peopled this country.

Like men the world over, she thought, there were some who were true and some who were full of trickery. Yet in some ways Westerners stood alone. Their hates were abrupt, direct, savage. Their friendships strong, deep and quiet. A thing was, or it was not. Like the way Logan Ware had spoken of that dreadful affair with that Frog Shefflin. Kill or be killed. No hypocrisy, no side-stepping of an issue, no attempt at excuse or self-justification. Just a simple statement of fact. Kill or be killed.

Abruptly Loren Rudd remembered the news the Larribee brothers had brought. Tilton Bennett—shot to death as he sat in his office. Because he had not been a true man, so Logan Ware had claimed, because he had been set to doublecross, for money. She remembered that Ware had told her that when the night had gone and the sun arrived to drive away the darkness and shadows, she would not be nearly so upset over the affair. And this, she realized, with a little start of dismay, was true.

For the past several hours she had given no thought at all to Bennett. She had been thinking and worrying about this Hat crew, these men who had boiled out in the middle of the night to race to the protection of Hat interests—her interests. They had given no thought to what they might ride into, even conflict and death. Hat interests called them, so they had ridden.

She was beginning to understand what the outfit meant to them. They accepted without question long hours of killing toil, danger, hardship—all for the outfit. They would work for it, fight for it, die for it. It wasn't a material angle which held them. It was principle, deep and fundamental. And if she went through with what her mother had asked her to do, she would be betraying this principle.

For the first time since she had come to Long Valley, a wavering in her intention took place. Her mood became one of thoughtful preoccupation. . . .

OVER the breakfast table, Logan Ware told his men what lay ahead. They had cleaned up and were in dry clothes again and wolfish with hunger.

"It's started," Ware said bluntly. "They'll hit us there. You boys will come closer to livin' in the saddle than ever before in yore lives. We've got to patrol Hat range constant. We'll sleep a little and eat when we can, but mostly we'll ride. As soon as I can locate some reliable hands, I'll bring in more to help us. Yuh'll ride with a short gun on yore hip and a rifle under yore stirrup leather. Yuh'll shoot first and ask questions later. Whether the Hat stands or falls will be decided in the next month or six weeks."

As soon as breakfast was over they were out catching up fresh broncs. The Larribee brothers, Ware sent out with Packy Maroon, with orders to Packy to show them the approximate west boundary. Tex and Rainy Day hooked up the buckboard, loaded a spool of barbwire and staples and headed for the lake. Ware caught up a bronc for Curly Russell and took it at lead as he rode off after the buckboard.

They found Curly squatting on his heels, patiently guarding the cut fence.

"I'll help yuh get the saddle off that dead bronc, Curly," Ware said. "Then you get back to breakfast. After that yuh can ride a little patrol out to the east."

Curly nodded, picking up a blue denim jumper which lay on the ground beside him.

"Don't know which of the boys this belongs to, Logan. It was layin' over yonder. I'll take it in with me."

Logan started to nod, then stiffened as his eyes touched the jumper casually.

"Let me see that!"

He took it, held it up. "Tex—Rainy!" he called. "Ever see this jumper before?"

"Yeah," said Tex. "Chain Kelsey used to wear it."

"Right," said Rainy. "I was workin' over the same brandin' fire with him the day he got the scorch all across the back. Where did it come from?"

"Curly found it over there."

Tex and Rainy came over for a closer look.

"It's Kelsey's right enough," growled Tex. "Which means he was here last night. Probably had it tied behind his saddle and the tie strings come loose."

Rainy swore. "And once he rode for the Hat! But I never did like him. Too surly. Never opened up so's yuh really knew him."

Ware rolled the garment up, tied it behind his own saddle.

"I'll hand it to him, next time I bump into him, and see what he has to say. Well, let's get at that fence."

The wire-cutting job had been pretty thorough. It was past noon when it was repaired.

"Don't know how long it will stand," said Tex. "They may try it again."

"We'll keep an eye on it," said Ware. "Just one of a lot of things we'll have to keep an eye on."

"We goin' to let that crowd keep diggin' at us?" growled Tex. "Me, I'm in favor of packin' the fight to 'em, and settle things, once and for all."

"That's just what they're 'hopin' we'll do," Ware said. "And they'd be all set for us, and cut us to shreds. They're goin' to dig at us, tryin' to get us to lose our heads and go wild and ridin' into somethin'. The time ain't ripe for us to go after 'em that way. When it is, we'll move."

Tex and Rainy loaded their tools into the buckboard and were about to head back to headquarters when Tex said:

"Here comes that girl. She's a nice youngster and a mighty pretty one, even if she has got her ideas kind of tangled. But with things roughing up across the range, she shouldn't be ridin' alone too much."

Ware nodded. "I'll speak to her about that."

LOREN waved to Tex and Rainy as they rolled past her in the buckboard, and jogged on over to Ware. "I wanted to see the place of last night's trouble," she explained

She was, thought Ware, as bright and lovely a thing as he had ever seen, with the sun glinting in her hair and building warm tan across her cheeks.

"Yuh shouldn't ride this far from headquarters alone," he told her.

"And why not? I won't get lost."

"I'm not worried about that. It's not the valley—it's some of those who ride in it."

She colored slightly. "Really, I think you are trying to build up a threat that doesn't exist. Why should anyone bother me?"

Ware spun a cigarette into shape. "This lake," he said quietly. "I told yuh before that there are men who would cheerfully cut a hundred throats to own it. The lake is yores. Hat range is yores. With you as a hostage, the men who want what you own would have a mighty strong trump card. Besides, yuh're a woman—a lovely one. In Long Valley, as well as any other place in the world, there are two-legged brutes who only look like men. Believe me, I'm not talkin' just to make a noise."

She looked at him, then looked away, her color deepening. "I seem to be the cause of a great deal of trouble to you."

"Yuh're Hampton Rudd's daughter," Ware said steadily. "He asked me to see that yuh got all he'd built up. I'm tryin' to do that. So no harm must come to yuh."

She kept staring at the lake. "You said there were seven cows you couldn't save. What's become of them?"

Ware pointed. "Notice how the breeze is ripplin' the water? But the ripple breaks and the water seems to slide over somethin' just beneath the surface? Well, there's the body of a cow there. And over there another, and yonder still another. The mud is takin' 'em down slowly.

Loren's face was sober. "I don't believe I ever really hated anyone in my life. But right now I think I hate the men responsible for such cruelty."

"Yuh needn't be ashamed to hate," said Ware. "If yuh got good reasons."

"Let's ride," Loren said abruptly. "Back to where the blackbirds sing."

They set off at a leisurely jog. Loren sat her saddle lightly, with supple muscled grace.

"You deserve a better lookin' hoss than any which carry the Hat brand," Ware said. "I know of one I'd like to see yuh up on."

"What's the matter with this one? It is a good horse."

"Shore, but homely as sin. Just an ordinary, everyday cow bronc. It spoils the picture."

"The picture is this lake and the blue sky and this tawny valley and that shaggy, blue mountain over there. Who cares for more?"

Ware did not answer. He was staring with narrowed eyes out along the curve of the lake shore. Standing against a fringe of tules was a horse, saddled, but with saddle empty. A big, rangy, line-backed dun, standing quietly.

"Wait here!" Ware said, his voice sharp, and before she could answer, lifted his bronc to a run.

As he came up, the dun lifted its head and whickered, plaintively. Ware pulled up and shot a glance all around. Beyond the dun a thin line of tules had been broken down, as though something had crept through them, or been dragged over them.

Ware swung from leather, followed that thin trail to the water's edge. There, sprawled on the mat of crushed tules, was Slide Maidlie, the gunman.

Hatless and with all one side of his head smeared and matted with dried blood. It was not until Ware bent low over the motionless figure that he saw that Maidlie was still alive.

VIII

WHEN Logan Ware emerged from the tules, carrying Slide Maidlie in his arms, Loren Rudd was there, white-faced.

"Not—not dead?" she stammered.

"No. But like to be, for all I know. Looks like a slug nearly scalped him."

He put his burden down, gently.

"Who is it?"

"Maidlie is his name. Slide Maidlie."

Ware headed back through the tules, scooped his hat full of water and returned. Loren was kneeling over the gunman, unknotting his neckerchief.

"Let me," she said, in a strangely quiet and determined voice.

She dipped the neckerchief in the water, began gently washing blood and dirt from that ragged bullet slash. Ware splashed the rest of the water on Maidlie's face and throat, went back for more. He got back just as Maidlie groaned and opened his eyes.

Maidlie mumbled unintelligibly. Ware funneled the brim of his hat against Maidlie's lips and Slide gulped desperately. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again the dull shock in them had faded somewhat. They grew intelligent with returning strength.

He stared at the girl bent over him, with something like incredulity.

"I guess it's real," he mumbled. "Some more—water—"

He drank, and when Loren rinsed out the neckerchief in the balance, Ware went back for another hatful. When he returned, Maidlie managed a grim bitter smile.

"The wheels ain't goin' round and round quite so fast," the gunman murmured. "You're Ware, I know. The lady—could be an angel."

"She's real, Maidlie," said Ware. "Can yuh remember what happened?"

"I'm ridin', takin' a look at the country. I see the lake and cut in toward it. Then my head explodes. When I come to, there's old Cougar standin' over me, nudgin' me, whickerin' anxious. I'm burnin' up with thirst. I remember there was a lake, but all I could do was crawl. Before I get to the lake I pass out again. Next time I get my eyes open it's night. I kept tryin' to locate that lake. I crawled into some tules. I go out once more. That's all I remember—until now."

"Don't make him talk any more," Loren said curtly. "Loan me your neckerchief. I've got to manage a bandage. Some more water, please."

Ware brought it and helped her with a crude bandage.

"If I get yuh in yore saddle, do yuh think yuh can stick it for a few miles?" Ware asked Maidlie.

"Tie me in it and I'll have to stay put. Where away?"

"Hat headquarters. Hang on to yoreself."

Maidlie was reeling by the time Ware got him astride the dun. But after a moment the gunman steadied, straightened.

"I'll make it," he said, through gritted teeth.

With his riata, Ware tied Maidlie's ankles to the cinch rings, brought the end of the rope up and tied Maidlie's wrists to the saddle-horn.

"There! Yuh might sag, but yuh won't go off." Ware turned to Loren. "Take him straight home. If he passes out, don't stop. Keep right on travelin', for the quicker he's on a bunk, the better. If none of the boys are around, Smoky and Mother Sutton can help yuh. I'm goin' after Doc Abbey."

Loren mounted and took the dun horse's rein. Maidlie turned his head painfully.

"In town, watch that fellow Grande, Ware. He's part snake, part wolf—and all against yuh."

Ware watched them for a hundred yards or so, saw that all was going well, then climbed into his own saddle. He picked up the scuffed marks where Maidlie had dragged himself along, then backtracked them. He found Maidlie's big black gun and retrieved it. And nearly three hundred yards from the lake he found Maidlie's bullet-torn hat, where Maidlie had first fallen from his saddle.

The only spot of cover that could have hidden the person who fired the shot, and which was most likely, was a small, isolated tule clump at the end of a little outreaching arm of the lake. Ware rode over to it.

Search showed a small, trampled spot in the tules. It showed several cigarette butts and a single empty rifle shell, which told nothing, since it was of a calibre much used throughout the valley. Also, not yet fully erased by the lapping of the water were hoof marks, where a horse had stood.

It was clear enough. Hidden by the tule clump, someone had lain in wait and gulched Slide Maidlie as the gunman had ridden past. It was something for a man to think about, as well as Maidlie's warning about Dave Grande.

Thinking about it as he rode to Canyon, Ware was not as surprised as he might have been. Grande was a man behind a mask, secretive, with cold black eyes no man could read. A man who held all other men at arm's length and who kept his own council. Any sort of a scheme might take form in Dave Grande's guarded mind.

As for the attempted killing of Slide Maidlie, there might be any number of answers. Some old and unsuspected grudge. The queerly twisted hunger which some men knew to bolster their own reputation by smoking down a known and feared gunfighter. Such hunters of doubtful glory seldom had the courage to make their try face to face with their victims. The history of the West was full of instances of gunfighters of wide reputation being cut down by treachery and cowardice. Jesse James, for one. Wild Bill Hickok for another. Shot down from behind by small, cowardly, venomous men.

In Canyon, Ware found Doc Abbey in his office, then went down to Dub Pennymaker's stable to hook a team into a buckboard for Doc. Dub was puttering about the premises, still plenty shaky and weak from his beating.

"What's the idea?" demanded Ware. "Hasn't Steve Sutton been takin' care of things, Dub?"

"Shore," mumbled Dub. "Keeps all the heavy work cleaned up."

"Then why don't you take it easy?"

"This ain't hurtin' me none. I wasn't made to lay around lazy."

Doc Abbey came and drove away in the buckboard.

"Folks shore are good to me," Dub said. "Steve doin' my chores, Doc takin' care of me and when I ask him how much I owe him he just says, 'Ten years of friendship.' Then you—I heard about how yuh beat the everlastin' whey out of Harmon. I'm thankin' yuh, Logan, but yuh didn't have to do it. I'll get me even with Harmon one of these days."

A queer, bleak light came into Dub's faded eyes.

"You keep out of Harmon's way," warned Ware. "He's just a big, dumb gorilla, but if he gets started on yuh again, he'll break yuh in half. . . . How's Cherry doing?"

"Chipper. I been thinkin' about that little bronc. Don't seem right I should keep her corraled up in this barn so much. Cherry loves to run and don't get near enough of it. She ain't cut out to be a cow bronc— ain't heavy enough or built right for it. And if I was to let her go, some knot-headed cowpunch

would begin right off tryin' to make a ropin' bronc out of her. If'n I knew somebody who'd use Cherry just for straight ridin' and who'd give her a good home and treat her right, I'd make her a present to 'em."

"That wouldn't be smart," said Ware. "Cherry's worth considerable money."

DUB shook his head.

"I'd never sell the filly. Some things in this life a man just don't figger to make money out of. Like sellin' yore own flesh and blood. I could give the filly away, but never sell her. Guess that sounds kind of loco, but that's the way I feel."

"Not loco, Dub. I savvy how yuh feel. I'm sorry yuh won't sell her, though. I was aimin' to make yuh an offer."

"What did yuh aim to use the filly for?" asked Dub.

"For Loren Rudd to ride. We got a lot of broncs out at Hat and most of 'em are good, mebbe better than good as cow hosses. But none of them got any real ridin' class to 'em. I'd kind of like Miss Rudd to have a real ridin' bronc."

"You go put a halter on Cherry and take her home, Logan. Take the bronc as a present from me to Hamp Rudd's daughter."

"I couldn't do that, Dub. I'd buy her, but not take her as a present."

"Yuh'll take the filly as a present," declared Dub. "Gol blame it, boy, I told yuh I was wishin' I could find a place like this for Cherry. I seen Hamp Rudd's girl just once, but if she looks half as pretty in a saddle as she did ridin' by with you in my spring wagon, why then her and Cherry will make a picture to gladden any man's eye. If'n you won't take Cherry yoreself, durned if I don't take her out to the Hat and give her to that girl!"

Dub was in deadly earnest, eager. Ware saw he would hurt the old fellow deeply if he refused.

"If yuh feel that way, Dub," he said, "all right. The Hat will make it up to yuh some way."

"The Hat don't owe me a cussed thing," said Dub stoutly. "All I want is to have the girl, sometime when she's ridin' Cherry, drop by here and let old Dub see how pretty her and Cherry are together."

"All right. I'll come by and pick up the bronc in a little while. Few things around town I want to do, first."

As soon as Ware left, Dub limped into his harness room and lifted a saddle from a wall rack. It was a stock saddle, and of high quality. But it was of a smaller, lighter tree than the regular ones, thickly coated with dust, the leather of the skirts stiff from long disuse. Dub got a can of saddle soap and a handful of rags and set to work, humming cheerfully. Dub Pennymaker was a man who paid his debts, and he felt he owed a big one to Logan Ware.

From the livery barn, Logan Ware sauntered up to the Empire. The place was empty, except for Dave Grande behind the bar and Stubby Hoffmeyer, over from his hotel, having a beer.

Stubby waved Ware up. "Have one, Logan?" he invited.

Ware watched Dave Grande pour the drink. "What about Tilton Bennett, Stubby?" he asked quietly.

Stubby grunted. "That's what everybody is askin' and nobody seems to know. I never was over fond of Til Bennett. A little too quick to do most anything for a dollar or two. Still and all, that's a tough way to die—shot in the back by some sneakin' killer."

"And nobody even guessin' who did it?"

"One guess is good as another, I reckon."

"There's been a professional gun thrower hanging around town lately," put in Dave Grande, in his cold voice. "The breed that kills for money."

"Yuh're speakin' of this feller Slide Maidlie, Dave?" said Stubby. "Well, could be. Sets a man to wonderin' what will happen next."

"Slide Maidlie didn't kill Bennett," said Ware. "He's a gunfighter, yeah, but no cheap, hide-in-an-alley killer."

"I see yuh rustle out Doc Abbey," said Stubby. "Somebody hurt out at the Hat, Logan?"

"Yeah — Slide Maidlie," answered Ware, watching Dave Grande polish a glass. "Somebody tried to gulch Maidlie, out along the lake shore. Creased him pretty bad, but Slide will make it all right."

The glass slipped from Grande's fingers, crashed to fragments on the floor. Stubby Hoffmeyer jumped, then grinned sheepishly.

"Doggone it, Dave—don't scare a man to death. With all this talk of sneak shootin' goin' on, any sudden noise like that bustin' glass gives me the fidgets."

GRANDE reached for a broom.

"One time," he said coolly, "I tried to figger out the percentage of bustin' glasses behind a bar. I got plumb bogged down in ciphers."

"Percentage," drawled Ware, "is somethin' that's working all the time. For and against. A man never knows when it's goin' to hang his number on the board. Somethin' schemers sometimes forget. . . . Well, obliged for the drink, Stubby. Next time I buy."

Back at the stable, Ware found Dub Pennymaker cinching a freshly cleaned and soaped saddle on Cherry, the sorrel filly.

"What's the idea?" he wanted to know.

"Saddle goes with the bronc," said Dub. "Now keep yore shirt on. This hull never cost me a cent. A saddle drummer left it with me, years ago. He'd been haulin' it around, tryin' to interest some of the women folks on ranches. Yuh notice it's smaller size than usual. Anyhow, this drummer leaves it with me while he goes over to Guenoc. He sits into a game there and makes a killin', and next mornin' he's found by the trail with his head beat in. And ever since then the hull has just been layin' around this stable, gatherin' dust. It's a right good hull and should be just right for Hamp Rudd's girl."

"You ain't much to look at, Dub Pennymaker," said Ware. "But I bet was Doc Abbey to cut yuh open he'd find a nugget of pure gold where yore heart is."

Dub managed a twisted grin. "A chunk of rawhide, yuh mean. Pretty shrunk up and ornery, too. . . ."

Logan Ware was cutting past the lake on his way home, with Cherry trotting along beside his bronc, when two riders came spurring toward him. Ware went alert when he recognized Ed Morlan and Buck Trubee.

The two former Hat riders came up quietly.

"Yuh don't have to watch us like that, Logan," Morlan said. "Buck and me been hopin' to see yuh. Wanted to tell yuh we're sorry for bein' plumb fools. You always treated us square, just like Hamp Rudd did and we shouldn't of listened to Chain Kelsey and rode out on the outfit the way we did. We must have been loco. Now we're driftin' and we want to wish yuh good luck."

"I hated to see yuh leave," Ware said quietly. "One question I'd like to ask. Where were yuh last night?"

"Over to Pete Lord's cabin. Pete's some kind of forty-second cousin of Buck's, so we holed up with him. He shore told us what he thought of us for ridin' out on yuh."

"But we had it comin'," mumbled Buck ruefully.

Ware could see that these two were telling the truth.

"Why leave Long Valley?" he said.

"Why not come back and ride for the Hat again?"

They stared at him. "Yuh don't mean—yuh'd trust us, after—" Ed Morlan stumbled to a stop.

"Why not? Here's what I want yuh to do. Go to town and get grub and blankets and equipment from Jake Farwell. Tell Jake I said to charge it to the Hat. Then line out for our Red Mountain range. Set yoreselves up a camp and ride that country. I don't need to tell yuh what to do if yuh run across anybody tamperin' with our cattle. I'll drift up that way in a week or two and see how things are goin'. Yore time starts again, today."

"You're plumb white," Morlan said gruffly. "But yuh won't be sorry."

Ware, about to ride on, paused. "Seen Kelsey around?"

"No," growled Buck. "And don't want to. After we left the ranch he gave Ed and me a cussin' out because we didn't back his hand about gettin' tough with you. We were already sick of the deal, so when Chain poured it on us we split up right there. We ain't seen him since."

RIDING on, Logan Ware knew a grim satisfaction. Two more hands to bolster up the Hat's thin force of riders. Ware was sure he would have no more trouble with Morlan and Trubee. They had allowed Chain Kelsey to sway them, but they had been quick to realize this and were only too glad to be back in the fold.

At the Hat, Ware found Doc Abbey just about ready to start back to town. Loren Rudd was talking with Doc.

"How's Maidlie?" Ware asked.

"Hard-skulled," Doc said. "In a couple of days he'll be ready for more deviltry. . . . What are you doing with Dub Pennymaker's bronc?"

"Takin' it out for sunshine."

Doc drove off.

"That's the prettiest horse I've seen since I came to Long Valley," Loren said.

"Glad yuh like Cherry," said Ware, stepping from saddle. "Because she's yores. Present to yuh from Dub Pennymaker—along with the saddle."

"I don't understand."

"Simple enough. Dub and me agreed yuh deserved to ride a prettier bronc than any this outfit can scrape up. So Cherry is the answer."

She stepped over to the filly, began petting the pretty animal. Cherry whickered softly, began rubbing a velvet nose against her shoulder.

"Cherry is a spoiled, selfish brat." Ware grinned. "She'll demand all yore time when yuh're anywhere near her."

"She's gorgeous!" murmured Loren, eyes shining. "But I can't accept her, of course."

"Yuh got to. It's all settled."

"Why are you so good to me?" she asked, looking at Ware steadily.

"My chore to make yuh see that the Hat is somethin' for yuh to hold on to, just as yore father left it to yuh."

"Doc Abbey told me how you got those bruises on your face." Loren was running soft hands over Cherry's tender flanks, now healing from the wicked spurring Fred Harmon had given them. "This was the horse involved, of course?"

Ware nodded. "More darned windy gossip in this valley," he growled. "Doc can be a regular old woman."

"Doc said you were one of the few men he knew who would go all the way for a friend and no questions asked," she murmured. "You've done it for my father and you did it for Dub Pennymaker—and because a horse was abused. There is softness in you, Logan Ware. You are a strange man."

Ware stirred self-consciously. "I make a fool of myself regular," he said. "Dub Pennymaker said the only payment he wanted for Cherry was that

yuh ride in on her to see him some time."

He changed the subject abruptly, telling her about the sign he had found at the spot of the attempted killing of Slide Maidlie.

"A little sunshine here and there, then the black shadow of killing or near killing," murmured Loren. "It is a mocking world, this Long Valley."

"It's our world," said Ware, "and we got to make the best of it. . . ."

Slide Maidlie was stretched on a bunk, a clean bandage on his head. He held out an eager hand for the big black gun Logan Ware held toward him.

"It's been with me for a long time," the gunman said quietly. Where'd yuh find it?"

Ware told him about the sign, and Maidlie nodded. "That hombre must have been well hid, for I never saw a thing. And I ain't the sort to ride around with my eyes shut." He smiled grimly.

"Any guesses as to who—and why?" Ware asked briefly.

"Mebbe. The proposition they offered me didn't suit, somehow. They could have been afraid I'd end up by comin' out here and sidin' with you and the Hat outfit. So they decided to put a stop to that, quick."

"Yuh say 'they'?" reminded Ware.

"That fellow Grande, at the Empire. He wrote to me, got me here. Watch him, Ware."

"I'm goin' to. Now I'll quit botherin' yuh and let yuh get some sleep."

WARE went over to the cookshack, found Smoky Atwater elbow deep in flour in his bread mixing tub, so got together a snack for himself.

"Wedge of pie in the cooler," grunted Smoky, so Ware got that, and settled down at the table.

"Boy," said Smoky, "when they begin shootin' fellows in the back, like Tilton Bennett got it, and when yuh begin findin' 'em layin' by the trails, gulched, like that Maidlie feller, why then the lid's off Tophet—complete."

"They're tryin' to pull us off balance," said Ware, "waitin' their chance. We'll wait and watch. When they make the big move, we'll try and be there for the argument. One place we're makin' progress. I think Loren is beginnin' to get the true meaning of the Hat, and what it's worth."

Smoky's eyes lighted up. "She's the pure quill, that girl is. When she got here with that Maidlie gent she called me out to help and, cool as yuh please, gave him a shoulder to lean on while we got him into the bunkhouse. She was right there handy while Doc Abbey was sewin' up Maidlie's head and slappin' a bandage on it. She's no wilted vine, Loren Rudd ain't."

Ware made a cigarette and started to leave. In the doorway he paused, eyes narrowing. Up at the ranchhouse, standing beside his horse was Lister Beckwith, talking to Loren.

She darted into the ranchhouse, but soon reappeared, pulling on pair of small buckskin gauntlet gloves. Then she and Beckwith came over to the corrals. Ware walked to meet them.

"I've been wanting a chance to try out my new horse," said Loren. "Now I have it. Lister and I are going riding. Would you catch up Cherry for me?"

"Shore," said Ware briefly. "How are things, Lister?"

"Good enough." There was something guarded about Beckwith. It was in his words and in his eyes, something almost like uneasiness. "That Bennett affair was a bad business."

"Yuh got any theories?" drawled Ware.

Beckwith shook his head. "I only know I don't like it."

When Cherry was saddled, Ware handed the girl the reins. "Hop on, and I'll adjust the stirrup length of this new saddle."

"I never imagined Dub Pennymaker would let go of his bronc," Beckwith said. "Cost yuh somethin', I'll bet."

"Cost never figgers between friends," said Ware enigmatically.

When they were ready to leave, Ware fixed direct eyes on Lister Beckwith.

"I said it once before, Lister, but I'm remindin' yuh of it again. A ride with Loren carries responsibility."

Beckwith colored and said irritably, "I'm no kid."

Ware looked up at the girl. "Should yuh ever have cause, give Cherry her head. She'll run right away from anything on this range."

They rode away, with the sorrel filly dancing with eagerness to run. "Yuh're right, Dub," Ware murmured. "She's a picture, up on Cherry."

He went over to the office, but hardly had he sat down at the desk than Mother Sutton came in.

"I don't like that, Logan," she said bluntly.

"Yuh mean, Loren goin' ridin' with Lister Beckwith?"

Mother Sutton nodded.

"What's wrong with it?" Ware asked.

"You're not forgetting that Lister was hand in glove with Yarnell and Huncutt in their first attempt to take advantage of Loren's mistaken ideas of what she should do with this ranch, are you?"

"No. But Lister seems to be undergoin' a little change of heart."

"Bosh!" exploded Mother Sutton. "No Beckwith ever had a change of heart regarding anything where profit was concerned. Old Draw Beckwith, Lister's father, was the most unscrupulous old scoundrel that ever lived. Lister is his father all over again, except that he hasn't his father's courage. But he certainly has all of old Draw's sly scheming."

WARE shook his head.

"He can't do any harm, takin' Loren for a ride," he scoffed. "There's been a big change in that girl. Hamp Rudd's blood is beginnin' to tell. The ranch is starting to get hold of her."

"Men like you can be plumb stupid at times," declared Mother Sutton. "Lister Beckwith is no unattractive clod. He's a handsome man. Nearly any girl would be impressed by him. Like so many with scoundrel blood in them, he can be plenty charming when he's a-mind to."

"I still say he won't get far tryin' to get her to listen to any phony claims against the Hat."

"I don't think he'll try to. Lister Beckwith is no longer schemin' to get part of the ranch. He's workin' to get all of it."

"How?" demanded Ware.

"By gettin' Loren to marry him!"

Ware reached for his smoking. "That's not so flatterin' to Loren, Mother Sutton," he said slowly.

"You, Logan Ware," declared Mother Sutton, "have one great fault. There is iron in you, but deep down you are an idealist. If you ever fall in love, there'll be but one consideration. The girl herself. Whether she's rich or poor won't matter at all. But not all men have your honesty. A man might really have affection for a girl, and still be thinkin' about gettin' a big, valuable ranch property along with her. Lister Beckwith is the exact sort to think that way."

Ware smoked silently for a moment. "What would yuh have me do? Give Beckwith the run? I can't do that. I promised Loren she could come and go as she wished, choose her own friends. There's a lot about women I don't understand, but it strikes me the shorest way to make Loren determined to go ridin' with Lister Beckwith would be to tell her she couldn't."

"You know more about women than you think," Mother Sutton said drily. "But I still say that if there is any

way you can keep Loren from being with Lister Beckwith, you'd better do it. That man can be an attractive devil when he wants to, and who knows where a girl's heart may suddenly go? Sorry if I've given you something else to worry about, boy—but I'm worried too."

Mother Sutton dropped a kindly hand on Ware's shoulder.

"If Lister Beckwith tries any double-cross around here, he'll wish he'd never ben born," he said quietly.

Hoofs sounded outside. It was Tex Fortune.

Ware called him in. Tex looked grim.

"Better spit on yore hands and get ready to throw a few, Logan," Tex said bluntly. "I just came in from the Punch Bowl country. There's at least five hundred head of Flat Y cows bein' bunched down there, just outside our line. That means just one thing, Dobe Yarnell is movin' in!"

IX

DURING the time Ware was at the corrals, catching up his favorite buckskin, Tex went over to the bunkhouse after his Winchester rifle. He came back with his eyes popping.

"Am I dreamin'?" he sputtered. "Mebbe I am. I go into the bunkhouse. There's an hombre in there, sleepin'. He's got his head all bandaged up. And it's Slide Maidlie! Now how in billy-blue blazes did he get there?"

Ware gave him the story briefly. Tex swore mightily and with satisfaction.

"That means he'll probably side in with us."

Ware shrugged. "Mebbe not. He don't owe us a thing. Besides, he's a sick man."

"He won't be sick long," declared Tex. "I know Maidlie's breed. They're either dead or they're able to do damage. Takes more'n a creased scalp to keep an old he-wolf like Maidlie long in the blankets."

They were ready to ride when a hard-riding figure came spurring in from the west.Tex's eyes narrowed.

"Now what? That's Ed Morlan! He's got a brass-bound nerve, to come ridin' in here."

"Another suprise for yuh, Tex," said Ware. "Ed and Buck are ridin' for us again."

"The devil they are!" exploded Tex. "Why I wouldn't trust them two jiggers from here to there after the way—"

"I would, and do," cut in Ware. "They made a mistake, realized it, admitted it. They won't fail the Hat again".

Morlan pulled his hard run horse to a sliding stop. He felt Tex's fuming glance and flushed.

"Buck and me did what yuh told us Logan," he said. "We got the gear from Jake Farwell and headed for Red Mountain. Out a couple of miles below Gue-Loc we see a jag of cows bein' drifted up from the southaest. We snooker up close enough to read some brands All Block H stuff. Them Huncutt cows were already over the east line of the Hat. Buck and me figgered yuh ought to know. So Buck stayed on to watch things and I hit gravel for here."

"Yuh used yore head, Ed," said Ware. "Catch yoreself up a fresh bronc. I'll be goin' back with yuh. Tex, take charge down at the Punch Bowl. Send Packy and Curly over to join up with Ed and Buck and me. You and Rainy and the Larribee boys hold the line at the Punch Bowl. Don't take any fool chances, but don't let Dobe Yarnell push yuh around too much. They're puttin' the squeeze on us from east and west. Scatter!"

Tex raced away and as soon as Morlan switched his saddle to a fresh bronc, he and Ware tore off in the opposite direction.

Yeah, thought Ware, Mize Huncutt

and Drobe Yranell were hitting full out at the Hat at last. You could fight men, even when the odds were against you, but to fight herds of cattle was something else. Cattle by the hundreds being driven in on Hat range from two directions. They would spread out, mingle with Hat cows.Then Huncutt and Yarnell could push more cattle on to Hat range, spreading over the flats, winding up the gulches, massing on the slopes.

Once outside cattle were there it would take the driving toil of weeks, even months, to drive them back. And while a man was driving off a dozen critters, fifty more would be hazed onto Hat range from some unguarded sector.

That was the Hat's biggest weakness —the very size of the range. To guard all its borders would require a crew four times the size of the one Logan Ware had available. Yes, Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell had struck shrewdly.

There was dust lifting, far down the valley, steadily creeping closer, mark ing the progress of cattle. Ware and Morlan picked up Trubee within half a mile of where Morlan had left him.

"It's hard to figger close, Logan," reported Trubee. "But my guess is at least four hundred head in that herd. And mebbe half a dozen riders chousing 'em."

WARE rode to meet the advancng herd. This particular stretch, winter and spring range, had already been well-grazed by Hat cattle, which had then moved on, higher up the valley A few stragglers still hung out here, but the advancing herd would pick up these stragglers.

"They're way over our heads in numbers," Ware said grimly. "But we can try and turn 'em. Come on!"

They lifted to a run, bore down on the point of the herd. Two point riders raced back toward the dust-clouded drag. Ware came in on the point of the herd with swinging riata end and shrill yipping. Ed Morlan and Buck Trubee added their efforts.

For a little time they made progress, drifting the point into the beginning of drifting the point into the beginning of a turn. With another two or three riders they might have made it.But there were twice the number of men pressing the herd on than were trying to turn it. The herd turned in upon itself a compressed, milling mass. Then cattle boiled past Ware and his two men scattering in twos and dozens and scores.

Dust swirled. Ware lost sight of Morlan and Trubee. His own horse was jostled as the herd began to run. It had been a long gamble, trying to stop or turn the herd, and it had been lost

The lifting yells of the Huncutt men held both defiance and triumph. Logan Ware's temper blazed, and he fought the jostling cattle as he tried to break clear and glimpse the Block H riders.

Buck Trubee swing his horse wide, striving to get free of the boiling dust and lunging cattle. Then the main rush of cattle was past him and the dust thinned. A mounted figure loomed in front of him. Buck thought it was Morlan.

"Ed!" he yelled. "What's the next move?"

"This!" came the snarling answer Too late Buck realized his mistake For this rider was Kelsey, and Kelsey, was throwing a gun.

Buck did his best to match Kelsey's draw, but he was slow. Kelsey threw two shots. Then, as he spun his horse he spat out:"Turn-coat!"

Morlan heard those shots, and premonition laid cold fingers around his heart. He spurred that way, cursing the dust and the stragglers of the scattered herd. He caught a glimpse of a rider, racing away. Chain Kelsey! Then the dust swirled close again and here

was a riderless horse with trailing reins.

Ware heard the shots also, and finally fought clear of the acrid dust murk. He had a gun drawn half-expecting a pitched battle with the Block H crowd. He was startled to see them racing away at a hard driving run, already beyond short-gun range.

Out of the thinning dust burst a rider, dragging rifle from its boot. It was Ed Morlan and Ed's face was bitter.

"No use, Ed—they're gone!" Ware yelled at him.

Ed bounced from saddle and dropped to one knee. His rifle crashed, the echoes vibrant across the valley. But his targets were riding low and hard and Ed swore brokenly when his rifle levered empty, with no effect.

Ed looked up at Ware. "It's Buck," he said woodenly. "Chain Kelsey got him."

They went back to where Buck Trubee lay. The dust was gone and the westering afternoon sunlight burned stark and clear. Chain Kelsey's shots had been mortal.

"Get his hoss, Ed," Ware said tonelessly.

They had laid Buck across his saddle and were tying him there when the pound of hoofs sounded and Loren Rudd and Lister Beckwith came galloping up. She stared at Buck's limp figure with shocked eyes.

"One of our men? Hurt?" Her voice was tight.

"Dead," answered Ware, bleakly.

SHE caught at her saddle-horn with taut, hard-knuckled hands. Ware swung his glance to Beckwith and his voice was rough and challenging.

"You knew of this plan, mebbe? Pushin' herds onto Hat grass, tryin' to drown us with cattle?"

Beckwith shook his head. "I knew nothin' about it and had no part in it."

"It's easy for you to say," charged Ed Morlan. "It's harder for me to believe it."

Beckwith's eyes narrowed with quick anger.

"I'll let that pass, Morlan, because I can understand how yuh feel right now. But what I said stands."

"You were with 'em, once, and not so long ago!" flared Ed. "Queer yuh'd have a change of heart so quick."

"Let it lay, Ed," Ware said.

"We saw the cattle and confusion and wondered about it," Loren said. "We rode this way—"

Ware nodded. He understood now the precipitate retreat of the Block H forces. They had seen Loren and Beckwith at a distance, had taken them for Hat reinforcements and, since their main purpose had been achieved, had decided against open battle. For all they knew, more Hat riders might be coming.

They finished tying Buck Trubee across his saddle.

"Let's get home," said Ware. "Nothin' we can do about that herd now. It's here to stay for a while."

They rode away, leading Trubee's horse. Loren and Beckwith followed for a while, then Beckwith reined in.

"This takes all the edge off the day, Loren. There'll be no welcome at Hat headquarters for me. I'll be sayin' *adios,* and driftin'."

She was wan. "If I wish to welcome you there," she said, "it doesn't matter how the rest of them feel."

"It's good to hear yuh say that," Beckwith said slowly. "I reckon yuh know how much your welcome has come to mean to me, Loren. A man can guard his words, but he can't keep his true feelin's out of his eyes."

She met his glance and faint color beat in her cheeks.

"I was enjoying our ride so much, Lister—until this dreadful thing took place. You'll come and see me again?"

"If yuh want me to. In a few days—after this has died down?"

"I'll be looking for you."

Beckwith watched her ride on, trailing Ware and Morlan and the horse they led. She was beautiful on that sleek sorrel filly. Even if she had not been the owner of the rich Hat properties, she was still a prize to quicken any man's pulse. With the Hat ranch —well!

Beckwith's eyes narrowed, a mocking avarice in their gleaming. His glance settled on Logan Ware, and went full of hate.

"I'll let you and Huncutt and Yarnell kill one another off, Ware," he murmured. "Then we'll see."

It was some time before Ware glanced back. When he saw Loren following alone he let Morlan go on ahead, leading Trubee's horse, while he pulled in and waited for her.

"Bitter business that yuh always have to bump into this sort of thing," he said, his tone gentle. "I'd like to spare yuh, but it seems I have no choice."

"Must this sort of thing go on and on?" she burst out.

He shrugged. "Probably. Until men who want the Hat leave us alone. This country is puttin' yuh to a stern test, Loren."

"It's making me hate everything about the Hat and what it stands for!" she declared fiercely.

Ware did not answer. He knew that here again was a mood which only time could erase.

They were a mile from headquarters when Packy Maroon and Curly Russell came riding out of the west. They stared grimly as Morlan rode by, leading the horse with its dread burden. They touched their hats awkwardly to Loren Rudd, who suddenly lifted the sorrel filly to a run and sped for headquarters.

THEY fell in beside Ware, who explained matters tersely.

"How were things at the Punch Bowl when yuh left?" he asked.

"Flat Y cows all over the place," said Packy. "Yarnell's crowd threw enough pressure on their herd to start it runnin'. That was just before Tex got back. Wasn't a thing we could do but get out of the way. The Yarnell crowd didn't try to make a fight of it. Soon as they saw the herd had got past us, they drifted. Tex is settin' tight now, and wants to know what to do."

"Go back and tell him and the other boys to come on in. This is my fault. I should have been hittin' instead of waitin'. Startin' right away, things are goin' to be different."

Packy rode off and Curly dropped in silently beside Ware, who rode in frowning silence.

Yes, he thought, he had blundered. Because of Loren Rudd, maybe. Trying to shy away from violent action for the sake of her feelings. That had been a mistake, for it had left the initiative in the hands of the enemy. It had been another mistake to attempt to fight cattle, a mistake that had cost the life of a good man. Tex had played it smarter. Tex had let the cattle go.

A man fought in the face of surprise if he had to. If the issue was not too important, he was smart to give way and wait a better chance. Well, there was one thing about surprise. It could work two ways.

Tex and the rest of the outfit got back to headquarters just after sundown and in the blue dusk helped bury Buck Trubee in the little, tightly fenced flat north of the ranch buildings. Here under the wide sky, slept Hamp Rudd and others who had worked for the Hat and fought for the Hat. Now, as they laid Buck Trubee away, another installment had been added on that price.

They ate a quiet supper, then Ware

drew Ed Morlan aside. "You better head for Pete Lord's place and tell him about Buck, Ed. He may want to pick up Buck's saddle and other gear. I don't know whether Buck had any closer kin. I want to find out, and Pete mebbe can tell me."

Ed nodded and went out to the corrals. Ware carried some light food over to the bunkhouse. Slide Maidlie was propped up, and looking better.

"Be ready for the saddle pretty quick, Ware," he said. "You folks have been good to me."

Ware hunched on the edge of a bunk, smoking silently while the gunman ate. Abruptly he stirred and asked:

"Yore gun for hire, Maidlie?"

Maidlie looked at him guardedly, then said, "No. Not for money. But I might strap it on for a friend. I've never had a real friend, and have spent a lot of time wishin' I had. Sort of a queer idea for a man like me to have, ain't it?"

"No," Ware answered slowly. "Not at all. There's a lot of ice in you, which don't make yuh easy to know. Yet yuh're not hard to like."

Ware rubbed a hand across his face. Somehow there was a weariness in this unconscious gesture, a certain loneliness of spirit. Abruptly he told Maidlie of the happenings of the afternoon, and of the death of Buck Trubee. And then, hardly realizing why, he told the full story behind the Hat and what he was trying to do, and why.

Maidlie listened quietly, the beaked fierceness of his face softened slightly.

"Yuh've been makin' one mistake," he said finally. "Yuh haven't been fightin' full out. This is old stuff with me. I've been through my share of range wars. And there are no rules. Any man who tries to stick to fair rules gets gunned, nine times out of ten. The side that wins hits hardest. Yuh kill men or they'll kill you. Remember, yuh can't brand a cow without scorchin' hide."

"A full-out war will be tough on Loren," Ware said morosely. "She might toss up the whole game. She's been close to that already. And that ain't what Hamp Rudd wanted. He wanted her to take over the Hat—and keep it."

"She'll lose it unless yuh whip that other crowd," reminded Maidlie. "She'll either toughen up, or she won't. And if she don't, then she'll never hold the Hat now or in the future. There'll always be men who'll look on an outfit as big and rich as this as somethin' to slice a chunk out of at any and every chance."

"In my boots what would you do?" asked Ware.

THE ice came back into Maidlie's eyes.

"Hit the other side and hit 'em hard. You know yore enemy. Go after him with no holds barred. Put the fear of the devil into him. Throw all rules overboard. Go after him!"

"I wish you were ridin' with us," Ware said simply. "Not just as a hired gunfighter, but as one of us. Chousin' Hat cows, workin' for Hat interests and, when necessary, fightin' for 'em."

A shadowed smile touched Maidlie's stern lips. "That's simple enough to figger. Put my name down in yore time book at forty and found. That way yuh'll have hired yoreself a hand. But offer me special wages and we can't do business."

Ware looked into the gunman's cold eyes. "What did Dave Grande offer yuh to gun me out?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Yet yuh turned that down and yuh'll ride for the Hat at forty and found. Yuh're a tough one to figger, Slide."

"Ain't I, though!" Maidlie's smile went a little sardonic. "I can't figger myself. But in some ways I've always been a queer sort of a hairpin. Once

I thought it was somethin' to walk down a street and know that folks were watchin' me—and hatin' me. But hate can get under a man's skin, after while. So right now I want to be an ordinary Hat hand, no more or no less. A deal?"

Ware put out his hand. "A deal. I hope yuh stay with us forever, Slide."

"Forever is a long time," Maidlie said. "Yet that prospect sounds good."

When Ware left with the empty dishes, Maidlie murmured to himself:

"An ordinary puncher again, at forty and found, ridin' for an hombre who gets under a man's skin. Well, I wouldn't have it different."

Outside, the rest of the crew were gathered under the stars, smoking and talking in subdued tones, the shadow of Buck Trubee's death still on them.

"I've just signed on Slide Maidlie at forty and found," Ware said to them quietly. "He wants to be one of us. Make it so."

Ware lugged the dishes back to Smoky Atwater, then went to the ranchhouse. Loren came out of the door.

"I want to talk with yuh," Ware said.

She followed him across the patio, from where the black gulf of the valley lay far and still under their eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Startin' right away I'm goin' to take the gloves off."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm goin' after those who are hittin' at us. It is goin' to be rough—no quarter given or asked. So I'm goin' to have to go back on a promise I gave you."

She was startled by the somberness of his tone.

"What promise do you mean?"

"That if you'd come out here to the Hat to live, yuh could choose yore own friends. I'm goin' to have to ask yuh not to go ridin' with Lister Beckwith any more, and he's not to come here again."

She stiffened. "Isn't that being a little ridiculous? What harm is there in me riding with Lister?"

"Once Beckwith was one of that other crowd," Ware said grimly. "For all I know he still is. The change in him could be nothin' more than a good reason to spy on us. And we can't afford to take chances."

"It might simplify things if I went to Canyon to live."

Impatience with her suddenly rolled over Ware. He caught her by the arms and tone was harsh.

"That's foolish talk. Is the chance to ride around with such as Lister Beckwith more important to you than the future of this ranch?"

LOREN stared up at him, her face paling under the stars. Then bitterness flared to match his own.

"I'm trying to make the best of a bargain I did not ask for and over which I had no choice. I own a ranch, yet I don't own it—not for a year, anyway. I'm just a figurehead and I feel like a fool. I've asked for little enough to help bolster my self-respect—just the right to ride with and accept the friendship of a man who has at all times been a gentleman, too much of a gentleman ever to lay a finger, let alone violent hands on me—as you're doing!"

She twisted, trying to free herself, but Ware's grip tightened. Her tone went icy.

"You presume too much on your authority, Mr. Logan Ware. Let me go!"

"Net yet!" Ware's voice was dry, bitter. "So Beckwith is a gentleman and I'm not, eh? Mebbe yuh're right. I'm just a plain fool, stupidly tryin' to hold this ranch together for you. Buck Trubee died for that. His thanks? Well, you answer. Not that he'd have expected any. Buck was only doin' his duty, holdin' to a crazy sense of honor that seems to afflict some men. I've been told I'll get no thanks if I break

my neck for the Hat, and I can see now that's right. I don't want thanks anyhow, it's just to make a promise good. Either that or—"

Unconsciously he had pulled Loren closer, until he loomed over her, dark and bitter. Abruptly his head tipped swiftly down and he kissed her on the lips.

He set her back from him, let go of her. His laugh was harsh with mockery at himself.

"That guarantees me a fool, don't it? And no gentleman. But I know now why I haven't been thinkin' straight."

He turned and stalked away into the night. Loren stood motionless for a long, long time. Once she touched a fingertip to her lips, almost wonderingly.

X

THE crew was still bunched outside the bunkhouse when Ware went striding that way. His words slapped at them, harsh and direct.

"Been a big enough day, or do yuh feel up to a night of ridin'?"

Tex Fortune got the significance behind Ware's curt words.

"Let's ride," he drawled. "Let's ride far and wide—and hit hard. Let's throw a few instead of takin' it."

"That," said Joe Larribee, "makes sense."

"Catch and saddle!" ordered Ware.

They broke for the corrals, all eagerness and grim purpose. The somberness of their mood was wiped out in this promise of action.

From inside the bunkhouse came Slide Maidlie's voice.

"Hey—Ware!"

Ware went in. "What's on yore mind?"

The gunman's glance was very direct, but not so icily bleak as usual.

"I heard how yuh put it up to the men. It's a smart move, providin' yuh fight smart. Don't give the other side any breaks, and if the luck runs out for some of the boys don't let it grind yuh too deep. They know the risks, and accept 'em as part of the job—and they wouldn't have it different. Good luck, kid. And in another day or two I'll be ridin' with yuh."

They were ready to go when two riders came out of the night. Ed Morlan and Pete Lord. Ed looked around at the dark mass of men and horses.

"Where'd they hit us this trip, Logan?"

"They haven't. We're goin' to hand out a few on our own."

"Good!" said Pete Lord thinly. "Wait till I throw my warbag under a bunk, Ware, and I'll be right with yuh."

"This is Hat business, not yores, Pete. Not that yuh wouldn't be welcome, yuh understand."

"I understand everything," was Lord's grim reply. "Ed's given me the story about Buck. Buck was a long distance relation of mine, but still a relation. And a good kid. Not too bright, but with his heart in the right place. I want to get Chain Kelsey over my sights! Be with yuh in a minute."

They roared away into the night and Ware thought, "We're even again. We lost Buck—we got Pete, and there is plenty of rawhide in Pete Lord."

As black distance swallowed up the rush of horses and men, Loren came down from the ranchhouse to the bunkhouse. She poised in the doorway, fresh and cool in gingham, but with lines of troubled thought furrowing her brow.

"How are you feeling?" she asked Slide Maidlie.

The gunman smiled. "Better, thanks," and thought that this wasn't what she really wanted to know.

"What's the trouble now?" Loren asked. "Where are the men riding to—and what for?"

"In cow country, ma'am," answered

Maidlie, "when good men ride as Logan Ware and his crew are ridin' tonight, it is because they've been hurt and are goin' to hit back at whoever has hurt 'em."

"I knew it!" she cried. "I knew he would do something like this! He was born to violence."

"No," corrected the gunman gently. "No, he wasn't, ma'am. He was born to love laughter and peaceful living. He was born to ideals and a strong sense of honor. He was born to be true to a trust and true to his friends. When he uses violence it's because he knows it's the only weapon that will get results—not because he likes it. And the man who hates violence, yet uses it because he has to, is the hardest fightin' man in the world. I know ma'am, because I know considerable about fightin' men."

"You haven't known him long," she argued.

"Long enough. We've shaken hands on friendship, Logan Ware and me. And I rate his friendship as one of the biggest and best things in a life that hasn't known much of either. And remember, whatever he does, he does for this Hat Ranch, which means he's doin' it for you."

Which left her with no argument at all. All she could think of to say was, "I hate violence and want no more of it, even if that costs me this ranch."

SHE went back to the ranchhouse, walking slowly, sure she would not sleep this night because it would be one of nagging worry until she heard Logan Ware and his men ride home.

It was hard to realize that men were riding, vengeance bent, this night. The hush of great space lay over the valley. The sky was black velvet, jeweled with stars. The air was still and warm, but cooling, and the breath of it was of grass, sun dried and ripe. Sweet air, starlit silence, but the peace was only a mockery, for men were riding, guns ready to their hands.

For her, Logan Ware had said. Slide Maidlie had said that, too. So that this Hat Ranch would remain for her as her father had left it.

Once or twice she had known a deep stirring of emotion about the ranch, as though pride of ownership were about to establish itself. Yet instinctively she realized that mere possessive pride was not enough. She had to bring more than that to the ranch to be honest on her part. She had to achieve some part of how Logan Ware and the men felt. With them it was a wordless fidelity to the Hat.

She had come close to understanding this. Then violence had struck and men had died and everything had left her except revulsion, even hatred for the things the Hat stood for, and for which men had to die.

Along with her material heritage there was a spiritual something which she had as yet been unable to grasp. As she slipped into the ranchhouse and went quietly to her room she had the disturbing feeling that perhaps she wasn't measuring up to big responsibilities.

Logan Ware had these ideals, so Slide Maidlie had said. Back to her came the picture of Logan Ware as he had loomed above her out there at the patio entrance. Even yet her arms ached from the steely grip of his hands. And her lips—where he had kissed her—burned. She pressed her hands against her cheeks, felt the heat of the flush still there. . . .

Through the night Logan Ware and the Hat crew rode, their horses pulled down from that first driving run to a more stable pace. They rode until the lights of Guenoc pinpointed the night. Then they began swinging in a great half circle, until another small cluster of lights lifted out of the black gulf.

The Block H headquarters, Mize Huncutt's layout.

Logan Ware reined in. "I know how you boys feel, for I feel the same way," he said briefly. "Yuh'd like to barge right in and clean house. We probably could do it, but some of us wouldn't come out alive. Which would weaken Hat so much that Dobe Yarnell could move in and smash us. So we just give Huncutt something to worry about. We'll ride two circles and shoot things up. When I give the long yell we'll gather and be on our way. To Canyon. A hombre there I want to talk to. All set?"

Ware slid his rifle out of its saddle-boot, lifted his horse to a run and the rest of the outfit followed. Ware swooped in until the lights resolved into lighted windows in bunkhouse and ranchhouse. Then he threw up his rifle and began to shoot.

The bunkhouse was closest, so he gave that half the contents of his rifle's magazine. The other half he poured into the ranchhouse, pulling for those lighted windows. When the gun clicked empty he was past the ranchhouse, so swung to the right, stuffing fresh ammunition through the loading gate of his weapon.

Behind him came his men, shooting, searching every crany of Huncutt's headquarters with whistling lead. It was blind shooting, but it was not difficult to visualize the consternation in the building with rifle bullets smashing through windows and walls, splintering and gouging timber and joist.

Faint above the crash and snarl of the guns came the echo of shouts and curses. Coming around to begin his second circle, Ware cut in toward the now dark buildings. He whirled up to the gate of the cavvy corral. Leaning low in the saddle he threw open the corral gate, let it swing wide. Then he was gone again, riding low and hard.

GUNS began to spit crimson from the dark mass of the buildings. Some of the defenders were beginning to fight back. So Ware shot at these gun flares, as did those following him. He came around again and pulled in, cupping a hand about his mouth to give the long yell.

They came racing up to him through the dark, these men of his, and he knew a deep relief when they all checked in, untouched and exultant. There was a pounding of hoofs bursting through the night to their left and Curly Russell exclaimed:

"We got 'em up and ridin'! Things can get real interestin', now."

"That's their cavvy runnin' wild, Curly," said Ware. "I opened the corral gate. It'll be daylight before they'll get hold of a saddle bronc."

"I doubt we did 'em any real harm," said Tex. "But we shore spoiled their night's sleep. Also, it'll cost Mize Huncutt a penny or two for new windows. Hamp Rudd would have enjoyed this little soiree."

"Every time I cut loose," said Pete Lord harshly, "I was prayin' my lead would go right down Chain Kelsey's throat! Listen to 'em, will yuh? They're still shootin' holes in an empty night."

Ware reined away, setting his bronc's head toward town. Some of the bitter frustration that had banked up in him was gone. While this raid had probably done little real damage, it had done one thing. It had brought everything in the open. False and nerve-draining peace was all done with. From now on the enemy would know what they could expect. Open war, outfit against outfit, with no mercy asked or given. This was fight to the finish. This was the way Hamp Rudd would have had it—rough, roaring and defiant.

Every man must ride with his rifle across his saddle, alert and ready for anything at any time. Yet that was better than half-measures. As Smoky

had said, when men were being shot in the back as Tilton Bennett had been, and dry-gulched as Slide Maidlie had been, the lid was off and a man was smart to be instantly ready to cut down an enemy on sight.

If Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell had hoped to strangle the Hat with the sheer weight of cattle alone and settle things by that means, they were going to be badly disappointed. This night would show them they had to shoot their way through. And maybe they wouldn't like that.

Canyon was quiet when they rode in. Ware led the way straight to the Empire, dismounted, tied and went in, his men crowding at his heels.

Stubby Hoffmeyer and Jake Farwell were at a card table playing cribbage. At another table "Ace" Tomlin, the house gambler, had a game of draw going with Black Tom Gaddy and two Flat Y riders, Jenkins and Pardee by name, sitting in. Dave Grande was busy behind the bar.

Ware jerked his head toward the poker players and said over his shoulder to Tex Fortune:

"Keep yore eye on that crowd and don't let any of 'em leave. I'll have somethin' to say to 'em later on."

Ware stopped beside the cribbage players. "Hi, Stubby—Jake. How yuh peggin'?"

Farwell, never a friendly man, merely grunted and did not look up, intent on his play. Stubby Hoffmeyer leaned back and grinned up at Ware, but the grin faded when he glimpsed Ware's eyes.

"Good enough, Logan," he said. "And you?"

Ware's smile pulled thin and hard across his teeth.

"Out on a chore to separate the sheep from the goats, Stubby. Watch yoreself if things turn rough. Wouldn't be interested in buyin' out Grande, would yuh?"

Stubby's chin dropped. "Huh! Ha—what? Dave ain't figgerin' on sellin' out, is he?"

"He will be, mighty soon."

Ware went on to the bar, looked straight into Dave Grande's cold, hard eyes.

"Yuh got an hour to close up yore affairs and get out of town, Grande," he snapped.

DAVE GRANDE, mechanically swabbing down the bar top, went dead still.

"That's a poor joke, Ware," he said then, evenly.

"No joke. Cold turkey."

Ware saw Grande's eyes dilate, glare redly, then narrow to a masked blankness again. It was as if a window had momentarily opened to disclose a blazing pit.

"Yuh're loco," gritted the saloon owner. "Or drunk."

"Cold sober—and sane," retorted Ware. "Too sane to go on lettin' yore kind run loose. The first time yuh ever laid eyes on me, Grande, yuh hated me. Which makes us even. But I was willing to live and let live. Different with you, though. You wanted my scalp. Yuh offered Slide Maidlie five hundred dollars to smoke me down. Slide happens to be a pretty white hombre, though, and turned yuh down. So you tried to have him drygulched—and came awful close. Slide's ridin' for the Hat, now. Why, I'm doin' yuh a favor, givin' yuh a chance to get out of Long Valley before Slide Maidlie is able to be in the saddle again. What do yuh imagine would happen to yuh, if yuh ever met up with Slide again?"

Little ridges of taut muscle quivered along Grande's swarthy jaw. Despite the man's taciturnity, he could not fully hide the tempest of feeling that was racking him.

"Yore imagination," he blurted hoarsely, "is runnin' away with yuh."

"Imagination has nothin' to do with it," Ware said curtly. "Just cold facts. . . . Yuh're wastin' part of that hour, Grande."

"And suppose I don't go?"

"You'll go. On yore own two feet—or on a board. I'm through arguin'. Make up yore mind!"

"That's right," said a voice at Ware's elbow. "Make up yore mind, Grande."

It was Pete Lord, lank and leathery, hard as weathered stone.

"It was a pretty good valley while Hamp Rudd was alive," went on Pete. "A man could sort of figger ahead. But the minute Hamp died the snakes began crawlin' out from under the leaves. The buzzards and the coyotes began to gather. The Hat looked like a fat carcass and the varmints were ready for a feast. Well, some of us realize the worth of the Hat as a good, solid balance in Long Valley. We aim to keep it so. We can do without the snakes and the varmints, but not with the Hat."

Ware laughed, without mirth. "Yuh see how it is, Grande?"

"You can't do this to me!" burst out Grande, his voice strangled in his throat.

"And you can't go on schemin' to have men shot in the back," Ware said remorselessly. "Yuh wanted my scalp, too, Grande. Yuh think I'm fool enough to give yuh a second chance? Hardly! Yuh're wastin' precious time. Make Stubby Hoffmeyer an offer. Mebbe he'll buy yuh out."

Every man in the room was listening. The poker game was forgotten. Black Tom Gaddy came over to the bar. "Ain't yuh bein' awful rough on Dave, Ware?" he growled.

Ware looked Gaddy up and down. "You get back to Guenoc and stay there and mind yore business close and quiet, Gaddy, or you'll be takin' the long ride, too."

"I'll go where I please, when I please!"

Gaddy broke off short as Curly Russell jabbed a hard elbow into his ribs.

"Yuh'll do as yuh're told, mister," said Curly. "Remember me? The waddy you and yore crooked table euchered out of mebbe a hundred and fifty pesos one night in Guenoc not so long ago. You were the tough hombre that night. I'm the tough hombre this night. Yuh got yore ridin' orders. Take 'em and git!"

Curly's blue eyes were taunting. Gaddy didn't hold the hand he had at Guenoc. It wasn't three or four to one now, in Gaddy's favor. He looked around and said:

"I never bet against a pat hand." He looked across the bar at Grande and added, "They're holdin' all the aces, Dave. This deal is sour."

BLACK TOM turned and went out. Curly followed and watched from the shadow outside the door until Gaddy had ridden out of town.

Dave Grande seemed to have got hold of himself, for abruptly he shrugged, and looked over at Stubby Hoffmeyer.

"How much yuh offer me for the layout, Hoffmeyer?" he asked.

Stubby, bewildered, began to stutter. Finally he got out, "I don't want no saloon. I got a hotel and that keeps me busy. I don't want no saloon."

"Twenty-five hundred—cash," Jake Farwell said abruptly.

"Worth twice that much," Grande said. "Talk sense, Farwell."

"Twenty-five hundred," repeated Farwell. "Not one thin dime more."

"That," said Ware, "is a lot more than nothin', Grande."

Grande shrugged. "A cussed holdup, all the way through. But I got no choice."

Jake Farwell headed for the door. "I'll be back with the money in ten minutes."

"That will just give yuh time to get yore warbag packed, Grande," said Ware.

Dave Grande opened the door to the back room where he slept and went in, carrying a small lamp. Ware and Pete Lord followed him.

Ware's nostrils crinkled. Fresh cigarette smoke was in the air. The blankets on the bunk were rumpled. Ware stepped over, dropped a hand on them. They were warm. Ware went to the rear door of the room, tried it. It was unlocked. Ware turned on Dave Grande.

"Who was in this room?"

Grande's eyes were blank. "I don't know. And if I did I wouldn't say. There's a limit to how much yuh can push me around, Ware."

"Watch him, Pete." Ware hurried into the barroom and out into the street. Tex Fortune followed him.

"What's up?" Tex asked.

"Not shore that anything is. I just want to make a little prowl. Be back in a minute or two."

The street lay black and empty, the gloom particularly deep where the row of poplar trees marched in graceful but ghostly silhouette against the distant stars. Ware slid along from tree to tree, pausing every step or two to keen the night.

There was a queer rippling along his spine, as though the fingers of prescience were ruffling his nerve ends. He tried to add this thing up. Somebody had definitely been in that back room at the Empire, somebody hiding out, perhaps. Somebody who could have overheard all that had gone on in the barroom and who had slipped out of the back room just before Grande had entered it. And Ware had this queer feeling about that.

Down street a faint yellow glow flickered, then held steady. A light in Jake Farwell's store. Farwell was busy at his safe, no doubt, getting the money he had offered Grande for the Empire.

Ware moved down that way, the deep pawed dust along the hitchrails muffling his cautious steps, the black tree shadows hiding his tall shape. Again and again he swung his head, trying to get an answer for that uneasiness.

The lamplight in Jake Farwell's store blinked out, a door closed, then Ware heard the storekeeper coming up along the board sidewalk in his measured way.

Farwell was just passing the mouth of the alley that ran from the street past the corner office that had been Tilton Bennett's. There was a soft rush, a blur of violent movement, a snarling curse, a muffled blow, the thump of a falling body.

The whole thing happened not twenty feet away from Ware. He ducked under a hitchrail, snapped out his gun, leaped forward. He heard a whirling toward him, then stumbling and falling directly at him. Ware could have shot, but instead, chopped down with the heavy barrel of his gun. The blow landed solidly and the floundering figure collapsed in a heap at Ware's feet.

FROM the dark in back of Ware, Tex Fortune said: "Yuh take too many chances, boy. If that jigger hadn't stepped off the edge of the sidewalk when he whirled, he'd have plugged yuh. Who is he?"

"You old Indian!" Ware said gruffly. "I never heard yuh come up."

Ware stripped a match off a block of "sulphurs," slid the head across a leg of his jeans. The match snapped into flame and Ware bent over. Tex, peering over his shoulder, swore softly.

"Chain Kelsey!"

Kelsey was out cold. In one hand he held a thick wad of currency.

Jake Farwell was mumbling and cursing, trying to get to his feet, managing to rear up on one knee, then spilling over again.

"Take it easy, Jake," Ware said.

"Everything is all right now."

"Saw him duck out of the alley at me," Jake mumbled, "and got part way clear of the swipe he took at me. But he got hold of enough of me to drop me. Then he grabbed my money . . . Where's the money?"

"Right here, Jake. Easy, feller—easy!"

The storekeeper struggled to his feet. "Who—who was the coyote?"

"Chain Kelsey."

"Kelsey! Well, he always did look like a bad one to me. How'd he know I had big money on me?"

"He was in the back room of the Empire, Jake. He heard what went on in the barroom, and when you headed for yore store after the money, he sneaked out and laid for yuh in the alley."

"This town!" groaned Farwell, probing his bruised head with a careful forefinger. "More cussed crooks—!"

"This one's beginnin' to stir," drawled Tex. "He's all rattler and I ought to stomp him."

"Shake him to his feet and bring him along," said Ware. "I want to ask Mr. Dave Grande about this."

With Ware helping him, Jake Farwell clattered along the board sidewalk to the Empire. Behind, half-dragging his man, Tex came along with Chain Kelsey.

In the Empire, Dave Grande was standing behind the bar, an old canvas gripsack of personal belongings on the bar beside him. As Ware steered Jake Farwell through the door of the place and the light of the hanging lamps showed Farwell's dazed face with blood seeping from the cut in the scalp where Chain Kelsey's glancing gun barrel had struck, mutters of surprise ran all through the room. All eyes centered on the storekeeper.

Then, when Tex appeared, shoving the shambling Chain Kelsey in front of him, that mutter became a growl.

"Chain Kelsey, by glory!" exclaimed Pete Lord. "That's the whelp I want!" He moved toward the renegade puncher.

For the moment all eyes were on Kelsey, including Dave Grande's and in Grande's cold, black orbs leaped a flame of desperation and resolve. He whirled and darted into the rear room, slamming and locking the door. He was out the back door two strides ahead of the slug which Pete Lord sent crashing after him.

Swearing in bitter disgust, Pete smashed a shoulder against that locked door, but the lock held.

"Stay right with Kelsey, Tex!" Ware yelled.

Then he was out the front of the saloon with Rainy Day, Ed Morlan and several of the others racing after him.

They circled the Empire and found nothing.

"Spread out and look for him!" yelled Ware. "He can't be far."

They spread through the night, but the blackness was against them and presently, out at the edge of town they heard the sudden pound of racing hoofs, quickly fading.

Ware heard a growl of baffled anger and recognized Rainy Day's voice.

"No use, Rainy!" called Ware. "He's gone. Which was what we wanted, anyhow."

"He didn't make the break till he saw yuh bring Kelsey in," said Rainy. "If we could have put 'em face to face we might have learned some answers."

"Mebbe we'll get the answers anyhow," Ware said briefly. "Call the boys in."

THEY gathered back in the Empire. Tex had Chain Kelsey sitting in a chair, now. Kelsey's dark face was more malevolent than ever. The happenings of the night had stripped away any veneer and Chain Kelsey was definitely all wolf, surly, snarling and venomous.

At the poker table, where they had

sat quietly through everything, Jenkins and Pardee, the Flat Y riders, and Ace Tomlin, the house tinhorn, eyed Ware uncertainly as he came over to them.

"I don't know how deep you two figger to sit in with Dobe Yarnell or how far yuh'll stretch the string for him," said Ware to the two riders. "Yarnell has started things, so what the Flat Y gets, it has asked for. It won't be nice and it won't be easy. You can make yore choice—now!"

The two riders stirred restlessly.

"Yuh mean we can drift or take the consequences?" Jenkins blurted.

"That's what I mean. Which will it be?"

Pardee shrugged. "There's a limit to how much trail yuh can take in, Ware. Yuh can't run everybody who don't agree with yuh out of the country."

"I can make a plumb good try at it. Put yore guns on the table!"

They stared at him a moment, then did as ordered. Ware picked up the weapons and turned to Ace Tomlin.

"Yuh're out of a job, Tomlin."

"I know that," Tomlin said. "Yuh'll get no argument from me, Ware. The world's a big place and I can stand to see a lot of it."

"The stage will be through tomorrow," Ware said. "Take it." He turned and said, "Curly, go get that jumper from in back of my saddle."

Curly was soon back with the garment. Ware held it in front of Chain Kelsey.

"Recognize that?"

Kelsey merely cursed.

"It's yores, of course, and yuh know it," said Ware. "That was picked up the other mornin' out by the lake shore, where our drift fence was cut and a bunch of Hat cows choused into the mud to die. Killin' cattle that way, or stealin' 'em, all amounts to the same thing. I don't know who was with yuh, Kelsey—but I do know you were there."

The room was still, now. All present sensed something stern and implacable, a rendering of judgment. Even the working of Kelsey's face blanked out to a hard glare.

"Then," went on Ware remorselessly, "there was Buck Trubee. Buck was a good boy, and once he called yuh friend."

"That's the big count with me," growled Pete Lord.

"Then there was tonight's little affair," Ware went on grimly. "Yuh were hid out in the back room, Kelsey, and yuh heard Jake say he was goin' after twenty-five hundred dollars, so yuh went and laid for him, gunwhipped him and tried to rob him."

"All of which gets us—where?" snarled Kelsey.

Ace Tomlin had been staring at Kelsey, a thinly mocking smile on his face. He lifted a hand and fingered the dark flush of a bruise on the side of his face.

"None of my business, of course, Ware," he said, "but while yuh're at it, why not ask him about Tilton Bennett?"

Kelsey jerked around in his chair. "You blame tinhorn! Keep yore mouth shut! I slugged yuh once for—"

"That's just it," cut in Tomlin. "Yuh slugged me, Kelsey. Yuh knocked me down and while I was down yuh kicked me around and cussed me out. Yuh were tough then, Kelsey. Now it's my turn. Yeah, Ware, ask him who shot the lawyer in the back, and who tried to drygulch that gunfighter, Slide Maidlie."

Chain Kelsey gathered himself as though to leap from his chair, but Tex grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Stay put!" he rasped. "Things do catch up with a man, Kelsey."

Logan Ware looked at Tomlin.

"These things done at Dave Grande's orders, Tomlin?" asked Ware.

"Grande treated me all right," answered Tomlin. "I don't know what

yuh're talkin' about."

He didn't have to answer any more. This thing answered itself, now. It was Tomlin's chance to get even with Kelsey for some past mistreatment. And while Tomlin had the grace not to inform openly on Dave Grande he had, with what he had disclosed concerning Kelsey, as deeply accused Grande. For there was no purpose in Kelsey shooting Tilton Bennett in the back or of laying in wait along the trail for Slide Maidlie, except under orders.

Ware looked all around the room, met the glances of his men and in them saw the same answer.

"All right, boys," he said wearily, "bring him along. There's that old cottonwood just outside of town." He turned to the two Flat Y hands. "Made up yore minds yet?"

Jenkins jerked a nod. "We'll drift."

"That's a promise," said Ware. "Don't break it."

Outside Pete Lord said, "Put Kelsey on my hosse."

They went down the dark and silent street and out to an ancient cottonwood. They stopped Pete Lord's horse under a heavy, gnarled limb. Lord and Tex Fortune tied Kelsey's wrists, looped the rope about his neck, tossed it over the limb and tied its free end solidly to the trunk of the tree.

Logan Ware said, "Anything yuh want to say, Kelsey?"

His only answer was a blistering flood of curses.

Peter Lord whistled and his horse walked ahead. The cottonwood limb creaked and swayed, its leaves set up a dreary rustling.

XI

GRAY dawn was less than an hour away when Loren Rudd, waking from a fitful sleep, heard Logan Ware and his crew ride in. She heard the slap of leather as latigos were loosened and drawn from cinch rings, heard a horse spin its bit ring, heard another sigh as the saddle burden was lifted from its back. Heard the clink of spurs and a low murmured word or two.

Little subdued sounds, coming through the dark air of early morning. But no light came on in the bunkhouse, which would have been the case had a wounded man been brought in.

Loren went back to sleep and did not waken again until bright sunlight was pouring through her window. She heard unwonted movement going on in the house, so jumped up and dressed swiftly. She went out to find a big freight wagon drawn up in front of the patio and Mother Sutton supervising the unloading and bringing in furniture. Mother Sutton introduced her to a brawny, open-faced young fellow.

"My son, Steve," Mother Sutton said.

Logan Ware was there, with a couple of the hands, helping. Ware was grave and silent, looking a trifle gaunt. Loren got him aside.

"Last night—you—we—none of our men got hurt?"

"Not a scratch," he told her.

The answer did not wholly satisfy her, for there was something about him which hinted at things untold. He moved off to give a hand with a particularly heavy piece of furniture.

Loren ate breakfast alone and from the kitchen window saw Ware talk briefly with Steve Sutton who left soon after atop his heavy freight wagon. Riders began catching and saddling, then riding off in pairs.

Ware came over to the office alone. Loren went in there a little later and found him slouched in his chair, staring grim-faced at nothing.

"Are you sure you told me the truth?" she asked. "You said none of our men was hurt last night. Yet, something is troubling you. What is it?"

He hesitated, looking at her guarded-

ly. "The question of right and wrong has got me by the throat. The boys all say I did right. I'm not so shore." He drew a deep breath. "I ordered a man hung, last night."

"There!" he thought. "That does it. She'll hate me forever and ever, now. But it's better for her to find it out from me, than from someone else."

She caught the back of a chair, leaned on it, her slim hands white with pressure.

"You—hung a man—last night?"

"Yes. Chain Kelsey. The man who helped cut our drift fence at the lake and drove cows through to die in the mud. The man who killed Buck Trubee and shot Tilton Bennett in the back. The man who tried to gulch Slide Maidlie, and tried to rob Jake Farwell. Those are the things I know of. There could have been and probably were more. So—we hung him."

He could see something almost like physical sickness come over her. She spoke as though to herself.

"I've tried to understand that—that a man might kill in defense of his own life. And that a rider might die as Buck Trubee did, in open fight over range and cattle. But to order a—a man hung! Only the law, the courts may do that. No single man has the right."

The look she gave him made him cringe. He would rather have taken a cut from a quirt across the face.

"That's just it," he said tonelessly. "If there was any law in this valley, any court—" Then he went on, almost defiantly, "What would yuh have had me do? Turn Kelsey loose to do more deviltry? The man was all renegade, and guilty as any man ever could be. I did what I felt was right."

"But you had no right—no right at all!" She was flaying him now. "No one man has the right to say another man shall hang, regardless of his guilt. You are not the law. You are not a king. There is savagery in you. I've felt it from the first. And my conscience—I can't live with it any more. Don't tell me you do such things for me, for my interests! You do them because there is a brute in you, a brute that I despise!"

SHE turned and ran from the room. Ware got to his feet, paced the room, then stood staring at the wall.

"Yuh put a load on me, Hamp," he muttered. "And I don't know if I can stand up to it. Mebbe I'm not the man, after all."

There was a sudden, bone-deep weariness in him, more mental than physical, and along with this was a biting restlessness. He went back to the bunkhouse and met Slide Maidlie coming out of it. Aside from a certain gauntness, Maidlie seemed much his old self. His hat hid most of the bandage on his head.

Maidlie grinned. "A man like me can stand just so much bunk. I'm goin' to catch up Cougar and set a saddle again for a while. I'm restless."

"That makes a pair of us," Ware nodded. "Come on."

They went over to the corrals, caught and saddled, and headed out. . . .

Back in the ranchhouse, Mother Sutton was trying to get Loren interested in placing the new furnishings. The girl was apathetic.

Mother Sutton, the soul of patience, finally lost hers.

"I declare I don't understand you, Loren Rudd!" she burst out. "Here the finest ranch in Long Valley is yours. This ranchhouse is the finest building in the valley. Your future is bright, or could be if you wanted to make it so. You have a devoted foreman and crew. You should be the happiest person alive. Instead, you are moody and—and. . . . Oh, I declare I can't understand you!"

The girl's mouth and chin set in their old lines of severity. There was de-

fiance in the glance she turned on Mother Sutton.

"You do not know that last night he ordered a man—hung."

"I know all about it," declared Mother Sutton. "Logan told me. So did Steve, my own son. Logan did more than that. He ran that evil-eyed saloon owner, Dave Grande, out of town. Bless the boy for both things."

"Now I don't understand you!" Loren said sharply. "How can you, a woman, say that? I mean—about the hanging? Such a ghastly thing!"

Mother Sutton dropped a hand on Loren's arm, pulled her over to a brand new sofa.

"Sit down here with me, my dear. Once I was young, like you, and full of the same kind of ideas about life and death, right and wrong, justice and injustice. This country then was much rougher, much wilder, much more brutal than now. Yet much the same. There were good men and bad men, there were honest men and there were thieves. And there was truth and there were lies. And if the good men had not been the strongest, Long Valley today would be a howling wilderness. I'm remembering your father, when I first knew him."

"Why do you and Logan Ware always come back to my father?" demanded Loren.

"Because," said Mother Sutton simply, "in his way he was a great man. Do you know what his home was when he first came to Long Valley? Why, almost a burrow in the earth. A dugout, cut into the slope of a hill, roofed with cottonwood branches and sod, a cubby hardly as big as the pantry of this ranchhouse. That was Hampton Rudd's start. To that start he brought courage, fortitude, faith. And whatever ruthlessness that was necessary. He worked and fought and worked some more. And he built, acre by acre, stone by stone.

"Men not even one half his worth in character and courage and strength, tried again and again to smash him, destroy him and all his works. One by one he whipped them. Those who needed killing, he killed. Those who deserved hanging, he hung. Those who deserved to be run out of the country, he ran. He made Long Valley a fit place for decent people to live. Hampton Rudd and his breed of men opened the wilderness of the West, made its future secure. Sometimes I think the Lord fashioned men like that for that express purpose."

MOTHER SUTTON'S kindly eyes seemed to deepen with the light of past glories.

"I'm glad," she went on, "that I was able to be a part of such times. At first I was much like you are now, revolted by the raw brutality which broke loose now and then. But I came to realize that life and death did not matter so much as long as it was the good who lived and the evil who died. Chain Kelsey was a slinking wolf. He deserved what he got. It took more courage than you realize to order him hung, for that meant accepting a great responsibility. Not all people have the courage for that. Logan Ware has because he's made of the same stuff as Hampton Rudd. The strong of the West."

Loren sat stiffly erect. "He could have run Chain Kelsey out of the valley, the same as he did that saloon-keeper. But to deliberately order a man hung—"

"If he'd ordered Kelsey out of the valley that wouldn't have kept him out. Like the wolf he was, he would have come slinking back, to prowl and kill some more. You don't order evil things like Kelsey out of this life. You stamp 'em out."

Loren did not soften. Mother Sutton sighed deeply and stood up.

"I'm afraid, my dear, that there are some things you are going to have to learn by hard experience. I'd like to

spare you that experience if I could. But maybe that's the best way."

Mother Sutton went off about her housework. Loren sat for some time moodily. Then she got up and went into the office. This little room reflected the personality of one man. Logan Ware. Tally books stacked neatly on the desk and the ranch time book beside them. She idly turned the pages of this last. The writing in it was not smooth and cultured, yet there was a certain strength, a definiteness to each letter.

A name leaped off a page at her. Chain Kelsey. She shut the book quickly. There it was, the evidence. Once this man Kelsey had ridden for the Hat. Once he had slept in the same bunkhouse, eaten at the same table with Logan Ware, ridden with him on the same ranch chores. And then, Logan Ware had ordered him hung.

A chill ran through the girl. Regardless of what Kelsey had done, to have taken him out and hung him—

She went to the window and saw Lister Beckwith riding in past the corrals. She darted to the door and out to meet him. Here was one man at least, in this wild valley, who seemed to have time and the wish for the gentler, quieter things of life. It would be a vast relief to ride with him, talk with him.

Beckwith saw the eagerness in her eyes and smiled as he took off his hat.

"I was a little doubtful of my welcome, Loren," he said. "Expected any minute to bump into some tough, scowlin' hombre. But I took the chance, for I couldn't stay away. That's how I feel about yuh, Loren."

The warmth of his words sent a faint flush across her face.

"You've no idea how glad I am to see you, Lister," she said. "I want to get away from here for a while. Will you catch and saddle Cherry for me while I go change?"

He reached for his rope with alacrity. "Will I!"

Beckwith had just finished saddling the little sorrel and was slipping the headstall into place when Smoky Atwater came shuffling over from the cookshack, looking grim.

"Yuh still own a ranch, Beckwith?" asked Smoky.

"Of course I do. That's a fool question."

"Couldn't help but wonder. What with everybody else in the valley doin' a heap of scramblin' to hold things together, you seem to be the lone juniper with time to do a heap of hangin' around."

Beckwith's eyes narrowed over a glint of anger. "I 'tend to my own affairs. Suppose you tend to yours, Atwater."

"Loren Rudd is my affair, Beckwith. You go ridin' with that girl yuh got a heap of responsibility on yore hands. Don't yuh ever forget that—because I won't. Neither will Logan Ware."

SMOKY turned and went back. Beckwith stared after him, eyes fuming.

"There'll come a day," he muttered, "when you and a lot of others like yuh will go down the trail wondering what hit yuh."

Beckwith was smiling again when Loren came hurrying from the ranchhouse, dressed for riding.

"Where away?" asked Beckwith as they started out.

She pointed in the direction of Red Mountain.

"I've never been that way."

The sorrel wanted to run, so she let it have its way for half a mile, before reining down to a jog and letting Beckwith catch up. The action flushed her face and cleared some of the moodiness from her eyes.

"I feel better," she said. "Like I was free of some prison full of awful shadows."

"That's no way to feel about yore own ranch," said Beckwith. "Or mebbe

it ain't the ranch, but just the people? I can see yuh've been hearin' about Chain Kelsey. That was pretty strong medicine for one man to hand out. A man must think he's kind of a king to order a rope around another man's neck. I wouldn't want that on my conscience."

Loren was startled to hear herself saying, "Maybe it was justified. Maybe Kelsey deserved it."

"Mebbe. But not at the judgment of one man. But let's not talk about unpleasant things. Let's talk about you and me."

She looked at him and saw much that could be pleasing to a woman's eye. He had good shoulders, his features were regular and handsome and his teeth flashed white when he smiled. He flashed that smile at her now.

"Do I pass muster?"

"You've been good to me," she admitted slowly. "You seem to understand me better than any of the rest. You can see my side of things, where they can't. Or won't."

"I'd like to put in the rest of my life understandin' yuh, Loren, seein' things yore way so yuh would be happy."

She looked away, frowning. It was a troubled frown.

"Maybe I don't see things clearly, Lister. Maybe the fault is really mine, not that of others. I would want to be sure of that before I could be sure of anything else. I came here with certain ideas concerning my ranch. Now I am not sure those ideas were right. I'm quite mixed up, it would seem."

She lifted the sorrel to a lope and the miles fell away under the little filly's light, spurning hoofs. Beckwith kept pace with her, content to respect her mood for the moment. This was a hand he knew, which would require careful playing. One slightest wrong move could spoil everything.

They passed cattle, Hat cattle and Block H cattle. Here was range over which the tide of Mize Huncutt's cattle invasion had washed. Not far from this spot was where Chain Kelsey had shot down Buck Trubee. But Loren did not know this, nor did she read any significance in these mixed brands on the cattle.

Beckwith did not miss this, however. And he thought that his time was not yet here, that he would have to be patient. Not until Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell and Logan Ware had destroyed or weakened each other to virtual helplessness, would his turn come.

The range broke here into a gully, cut by winter storms, and now was dry and scabbed with whitened gravel. The short angle of trail which dropped steeply into it was cut deep with dust which lifted in an amber haze about them as their horses churned through it. They bent their heads, momentarily blinded. And when the dust cleared they found themselves facing five mounted men.

The man in the lead, with his arm in a sling, and with eyes hard and bloodshot, was Mize Huncutt. Two of the men with him were Morry Seever and Spade Orcutt. The other two were Fred Harmon and Milo Kron.

LOREN, slightly in the lead, reined in, startled. Then something instinctive swelled up in her—fear. For Mize Huncutt said, his voice heavy and harsh:

"This is plumb luck. Get 'em both, boys!"

Loren tried to swing the filly back up that cut trail. But Lister Beckwith's horse was partly in the way and before Loren could get clear Morry Seever had ridden up and grabbed her rein. Fred Harmon was alongside Lister Beckwith, the gun in his hand jammed up against Beckwith's body. With his other hand, Harmon reached over and lifted Beckwith's gun.

Beckwith sat utterly still, his face

draining white, staring at something he saw in Mize Huncutt's eyes. Huncutt laughed mirthlessly.

"Yuh blasted slickery, doublecrossing whelp!" he said. "Who did yuh think yuh was foolin', anyhow? Not me. Not Dobe Yarnell. Not Dave Grande. Not Black Tom Gaddy. Not Logan Ware either, I'll gamble. Not anybody but that fool girl."

Loren's first fear now changed to indignant anger. She lifted the quirt that had hung at her saddle-horn.

"Let go of my rein," she flared at Morry Seever. "Let go or—"

Seever laughed, leaned over and jerked the quirt from her hand with such violence as to numb her fingers.

"Had yuh hit me with that I'd have wound it around yore pretty neck," he said, with a leer.

Loren twisted in her saddle.

"Lister! Make this fool—"

She broke off, shocked at the stark fear in Lister Beckwith's face. Now it was Fred Harmon who laughed.

"Save yore breath, sister. Friend Beckwith ain't makin' anybody do anything. Ain't an ounce of wolf in him now—just all coyote."

Loren looked at Mize Huncutt. "You have no right," she cried desperately, "no right at all to bother us."

Huncutt did not even answer her. He just swung his horse around.

"Bring 'em along," he said to his men.

In the next half-hour Loren Rudd thought of many things. She thought of jumping out of her saddle and trying to run. She thought of trying to snatch her reins away from Morry Seever who was leading the sorrel filly. She did neither because she knew it would do her no good to try. Finally she thought of things Logan Ware had told her, warnings he had given her, and she went cold and shrinking inside.

Once she looked at Lister Beckwith, riding beside her, with Fred Harmon close at his heels. Beckwith would not meet her glance, just staring straight ahead. Beads of sweat stood out on his face. Loren felt a little sick at the utter fear she recognized. She looked swiftly away to where the bleak buildings of Guenoc began to lift out of the tawny range ahead.

When they reached the small town men came out on the ramshackle porch of the old stage station. Loren recognized Dobe Yarnell, but she did not recognize Dave Grande and Black Tom Gaddy, since she had never seen them before. But they were there.

Loren tried to keep her head up and meet the looks which came her way with cold dignity and scorn. She was able to do this until she stared into Dave Grande's cold black eyes. Then she looked away, flushed scarlet. Her flesh crawled.

"Mize," said Grande, "yuh shore drew a pair of aces this trip. Bring 'em in!"

"Yuh can get down and walk in like a lady, or I lug yuh in under my arm," Morry Seever said to Loren.

Loren went in. The room was musty with stale tobacco smoke, with the stale dregs of whisky, with dust and heat and cobwebs. A round-backed chair was pushed toward Loren and she sank into it.

Mize Huncutt faced Lister Beckwith, his sound hand on a gun, feet spread, heavy jaw and shoulders pushed forward. Huncutt's eyes were little and cold and merciless.

"Got anything to say?" he growled.

Beckwith licked his lips. "Only that I don't understand you boys goin' tough and hostile like this," he blurted. "Anybody would think I'd tried to cut yore throats."

"Not quite that, mebbe," charged Huncutt. "For yore nerve wouldn't reach that far. But yuh have tried to doublecross us, which is just about as bad. We had an agreement, Beckwith—you and me and Dobe and Dave Grande.

It was to be a four-way split of the Hat when we got it chopped down to our size. We didn't have our fingers crossed when we made that deal. Mebbe you did."

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," protested Beckwith.

THERE was a harsh curse and Dave Grande caught Beckwith by the arm, whirling him around.

"You know cussed well what Mize is talkin' about. But yuh wasn't satisfied with yore share. Yuh wanted it all—includin' the girl. A handy way to get all of the Hat, wasn't it? Talk the girl into marryin' yuh and then move in on the Hat as lord and master. Not that I blame yuh for wantin' the girl, though I doubt yuh wanted her as much as yuh wanted the ranch. But the point is, yuh was aimin' to doublecross the rest of us, and that—don't—go! Yuh should have had a good idea about that after yuh saw what happened to Tilton Bennett. Well?"

Loren did not want to look at Lister Beckwith, but she couldn't help herself. It wasn't good to see in anyone what she saw in him at that moment. She saw the guilt of him in his sweat-slimed face, in the working of his lips, the twitching of his hands—saw guilt and a stupefying fear.

A vast shame overwhelmed her. Shame of Beckwith, shame of herself. She felt cheap, soiled. Out of nowhere the thought of Logan Ware flashed through her mind, and she tried to picture him in Beckwith's boots at this moment.

She knew what Ware's reaction to talk like Grande was making would be. He would have had Grande by the throat, shaking the evil life out of him. Violence perhaps, but magnificent violence!

"What yuh want me to do?" croaked Beckwith. "I'll do anything you boys say. I'll get out of the valley, I'll—"

"All right," cut in Grande. "Get out!"

Mize Huncutt started to say something, but Grande cut him short with a glance. A relief, almost as sickening as the fear which had convulsed him, showed in Lister Beckwith's face. He seemed to have forgotten all about Loren. What lay ahead of her was apparently of no concern to him whatever, just as long as he got clear himself. He almost shambled in his hurry to leave the place.

Mize Huncutt spat on the floor. "Old Draw Beckwith was at least half a man. But his son!" Huncutt spat again.

"It's a mistake to let him go, Dave," Black Tom Gaddy said.

Grande grinned evilly. "I didn't want to mess up yore floor, Tom. . . . All right, Morry. And don't miss!"

Loren was slow in getting Grande's intention, and when she did it was too late. She didn't know what was meant until she saw Morry Seever reach behind a door and bring out a Winchester rifle. At the first pound of hoofs as Lister Beckwith hit his saddle and started off, Seever stepped into the door and raised the rifle, swift and precise and deadly as a snake striking. The rifle steadied, then leaped in recoil, the hard blast of it running away in whipping echo.

Seever lowered the reeking weapon.

"I didn't miss," he said, with thin satisfaction.

Cold horror held Loren motionless for a moment. Then she hit her feet.

"You cowardly, treacherous brutes!" she flamed. "You filthy, red-handed murderers! Logan Ware is right! He's been right all the time. Now at last I see and understand fully. You'll pay for this! You'll pay for everything. Logan will hunt you down, wipe you out! And I've doubted Logan Ware—and my father. But they were right—right!"

XII

POWDER BLUE twilight lay over Long Valley when Logan Ware and Slide Maidlie rode back to Hat headquarters. The rest of the outfit had already arrived and Tex Fortune was out at the corrals, waiting. Tex looked troubled, and angry.

"Better swap to fresh broncs," he said curtly. "We got work ahead. Mother Sutton was talkin' to me. The girl's gone."

"Gone!" Ware, just stepped from his saddle, whirled on Tex as though stung with a whip-lash.

"She went off ridin' with Lister Beckwith hours ago. She hasn't come back. That Beckwith hombre! I knew he was all skunk."

For a moment Ware stood stock-still. Something seemed to close about his heart, cold and strangling.

"I'll see Mother Sutton," he said.

He found her frankly worried. "Loren and Beckwith left not long after you and the rest of the boys pulled out," she explained. "I'd been talking with her, trying to make her understand — well, why you had to order Chain Kelsey hung. I didn't get far. She came in, changed to her riding clothes while Beckwith saddled that little sorrel horse you brought for her. And she hasn't come back."

"She's threatened several times to go back to town to live," Ware said. "Mebbe she has. Then again, mebbe she and Beckwith rode a little further than usual and are just late gettin' back. If they don't turn up by the time supper's over, we'll start a search."

In the hashhouse hungry men ate and reported on the day's patrol to Ware. Most of the borders of the Hat range had been ridden out and no untoward activity of any kind had been seen, no massing of more Flat Y and Block H cattle along the Hat borders, no suspicious prowlers.

Ware ate with one ear cocked for the sound of hoofs which would have signaled the arrival of Loren Rudd and Lister Beckwith. But none came, so Ware began to give orders for the search. That was when Slide Maidlie spoke up.

"I'm not aimin' to butt in, boy," he said. "But I got a queer feelin' about this thing. Mebbe Miss Loren has just decided to stay in town, like yuh say she might. Then again, mebbe she's ridden into somethin'. Let's remember what happened last night. Yuh threw a little soiree against Mize Huncutt's headquarters. Yuh cleaned up a couple of sour spots in town. Yuh advertised the fact that the Hat was ready and able to ride and smash and not wait around. Right?"

"That's right," Ware said impatiently. "What's that got to do with Loren bein' gone?"

"Mebbe they got her. Huncutt, Yarnell—that crowd. They know we're going to ride in a search. Supposin' they draw all of us away from headquarters. Then they come in, grab headquarters while we're gone. We're in a tough spot. They'd have the girl, have the Hat. They'd be where they could force a pretty good trade. How about it, Tex?"

"You got an idea there, Maidlie," admitted Tex gravely. "For that matter, you and me and Logan can make a search just as well as the whole outfit could. Better in some ways. We can travel with a lot less noise and fuss . . . Logan, I think Slide is makin' sense. Think it over."

Ware had a lot of respect for Maidlie's opinions. The gunman had a lot of experience in the devious schemings of men. And Tex was right in his contention that three of them could travel faster, more quietly than ten or a dozen.

"All right," he said. "Tex and Slide and I'll see what we can find. If we don't

turn up a trail by daylight, the whole outfit moves out. And in case Slide is guessin' right, the rest of yuh be on yore toes tonight. Rainy, you take charge. Put guards out."

IN THEIR saddles, Ware and Maidlie and Tex headed for town.

"If we don't have any luck in Canyon," Ware said, "we'll hit Beckwith's Two Stirrup. If that is empty we'll prowl the Block H and Flat Y. There should be a sign somewheres.'

When they reached town, Canyon lay quiet, Lake Street was a channel of darkness, splashed here and there with lights from window and door. Logan Ware pulled in at Dub Pennymaker's stable.

"Dub generally knows what goes on in town," he said. "I'll ask him if he's seen Loren Rudd."

But Ware could not raise Dub anywhere about the stable, which was dark and quiet. So they rode on up to the hotel where Ware dismounted and climbed the steps into the open light flare of the door. And at that moment the night shook under the bellow of heavy gun report.

In one long leap Ware was out of that dangerous light and flattened against the hotel wall. There was a trample of hoofs as Slide Maidlie and Tex Fortune swung their horses to face the sound of that gun, their own weapons drawn and ready. A breathless moment of silence fell.

Then came Dub Pennymaker's voice.

"It's all right, Logan. He was aimin' to get yuh, but I got him first. This is somethin' I been promisin' myself ever since he rode that Cherry bronc of mine and beat me up. Come and get him if yuh want him. It's Fred Harmon."

Dub made no apologies to the crowd that gathered. Someone brought a lantern and the glow of it showed old Dub cold and grim, an ancient Sharps buffalo gun across his arm.

"I see Harmon and Milo Kron came sneakin' into town just about dark," explained Dub. "There was somethin' about 'em that made me wonder. So I got this old buff gun of mine and started out to keep an eye on Harmon. He ended up hid out where he could watch the hotel door. I laid out in back of him to watch. When Logan showed against the light, Harmon started to pull down on him with that carbine yuh see layin' there. Then I let him have it. I feel like a whole man for the first time since he give me that beatin'."

"What about Kron?" asked Tex Fortune. "Where's he?"

"All tied up nice and tight down in my harness room," Dub answered. "After I see'd him and Harmon slip into town, and was fixin' to locate Harmon, here comes Kron, sneakin' into my stable. I waited till he got close enough in the dark, and smacked him on the head with the barrel of this old gun. Then I dragged him into my harness room and tied him up. I reckon he's still there."

"Yuh seen Loren Rudd today, Stubby?" Ware asked Stubby Hoffmeyer.

"Ain't seen her since she went out to the Hat to live, Logan."

"Come on, Dub," Ware said. "I want to talk to Kron."

At the stable Dub Pennymaker found a lantern and lighted it. Milo Kron was where Dub had left him, blinking stupidly. Some of the curious crowd had followed down to the stable, but Tex Fortune held them outside.

"This is Hat business," Tex said curtly, "and none of yores."

Ware shone the light in Kron's eyes. "Hear that gun go off maybe five minutes ago, Kron?" he asked.

Kron nodded heavily. "I heard it," he mumbled.

"That shot," said Ware, "killed Fred Harmon. Somebody sent you and Harmon to town to lay for me, didn't they?"

Kron rolled his head in a manner hinting of a rising desperation, as well as a sort of hopelessness.

"They can't whip you, Ware," he said huskily. "Your luck runs too strong. They move this way, they come out worst. They move that way, they come out the same. I've had enough. What do I get if I talk?"

"The question," said Ware remorselessly, "is what yuh get if yuh don't. Yuh're in no spot to bargain, Kron. The tree that held Chain Kelsey will hold you, if yuh want it that way."

FOR a brief moment the light of stubbornness began to build in Kron's eyes. Then it went out, leaving him dry-lipped and sweating.

"All right," he croaked. "You win. If it's the girl yuh're lookin' for, Dave Grande and Black Tom Gaddy got her out at Guenoc. And if yuh want to keep the Hat from bein' taken over, yuh better have yore crew at headquarters and watchin' out any minute."

"Tonight?" snapped Ware.

"Tonight. Yeah. Huncutt and Yarnell are goin' to hit the Hat all out with both their outfits. They figger the place will be empty with all hands away, lookin' for the girl."

Without looking at Maidlie, Ware said, "Slide, yuh're the smartest fox I know. Call Tex in."

Tex came in and Ware told him what Kron had said.

"Hit for the ranch—fast, Tex," Ware ordered. "Get the boys set. When Huncutt and Yarnell come in, give 'em what for."

"That," growled Tex, "is a pleasure I been lookin' forward to for a long time. Watch me. You and Slide headin' for Guenoc?"

"Right! Get goin'."

Tex hurried out.

"They sent me and Harmon to town to lay for you, Ware," Kron said. "They figgured yuh'd probably look here first for the girl when she turned up missin'."

"Sweet crowd," drawled Slide Maidlie softly. "With you done for, Logan, and them holdin' the girl and gettin' the Hat into their hands, the story would have been just about told. Mornin' would have seen a big change in Long Valley."

"Mornin' will see a big change," Ware said grimly. "Kron, how did they get Miss Rudd out to Guenoc? Did Beckwith take her out there?"

"No. Huncutt picked up her and Beckwith out on the open range. They were ridin' around gay as yuh please, when Mize and some of the rest of us bumped into 'em. Mize and Yarnell and Grande figgered it a big break of luck for us. Right now I can see where it was anything but."

"Beckwith—what about him?"

"He's dead. The others knew he was aimin' to doublecross them. Grande had Morry Seever gun him."

"Grande seems to figger right prominent in all the schemes," observed Ware. "How come?"

"Grande is the big wolf of the crowd," growled Kron. "He owns more of the Flat Y than Dobe Yarnell does, and half as much of Block H as Huncutt does. Has for a long time. A quiet deal between him and them two. Now—what about me?"

Ware turned to the stable keeper. "Can yuh hold him here, Dub—until tomorrow, say?" he asked.

"I'll hold him until Hades freezes over," Dub said stoutly. "He'll be here when yuh want him, Logan."

Ware looked at Maidlie. "You and me to Guenoc, Slide?"

"You'd go alone if I didn't say yes," drawled the gunman. "But I wouldn't miss this for a spotted bronc. Got a couple of debts to pay. One to Miss Loren because she's been good to me. And one to Mr. Dave Grande—for other reasons. . . . Are Grande and Gaddy alone at Guenoc, Kron?"

"Orcutt and Seever was ordered to stay there, just in case."

"That," said Ware, "is all we want to know. Come on, Slide. . . ."

A single light, like a furtive yellow eye, peered out of the dark bulk that was the stage station of Guenoc. All around the night pressed down, dark and still and vast. From Canyon, Logan Ware and Slide Maidlie had come fast but with caution, wary of possible trail guards or other night riders who could carry an alarm ahead of them to Guenoc.

It had been hard for Ware to use this caution. Milo Kron's blurted story had filled him with wild fury and anxiety. He had forced himself to keep this fury under control, to make of it a cold, settled, remorseless flame, for this was a time for clear thinking as well as for final, crushing action.

HE KEPT on thinking of Loren, of her fine cleanness of mind and purpose. Mistaken though some of her ideas had been, ideas almost incomprehensible in the light of hard-headed realities, Ware knew that she was honest in them, just as she would always be honest in all things. It was not her fault that she had been unable to discard these ideas readily, for they were the product of a lifetime of influence by a well-intentioned, but mistaken mother who had never been able to understand the realities concerned with Hampton Rudd's bid for a cattle empire.

But there had been times when the heritage of her father's blood had been discernable in Loren, a receptiveness to the spell of the open range, to the vigor and purpose of control of wide acres, of cattle herds, of awakening pride in and for the Hat Ranch. Given time, Ware was sure that she would have understood and would have loved and cherished the Hat as her father had.

It was the inevitable violence, the hard, cruel necessities of battle against the planned aggression of men like Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell and Dave Grande and minor thieving personalities which had revolted her. Dead men —some good, some bad, but all done for by violence in some form or other, because of the Hat, because of her ranch. It would have taken time for her to understand these things, too, and to view them in proper perspective.

And now this last and most vicious act of all. Captured and held by such as Dave Grande, Black Tom Gaddy and others of their caliber. Lister Beckwith, in whom she had mistakenly believed, shot down, maybe right before her eyes. Now she would hate Long Valley, hate it, and all that was in it, for all time.

Slide Maidlie's slow drawl broke into Logan Ware's thoughts.

"We better leave the broncs here, boy, and go in on foot. Hoofbeats, even at a slow walk, carry far on a night like this."

Ware looked across the night. Guenoc was a good half-mile away, but Maidlie was right. Ware stepped from saddle, drew his rifle from its saddle scabbard and cradled it across his arm. On second thought, he stooped and stripped off his spurs, hanging them to his saddle-horn. Slide Maidlie did the same.

"We'll swing wide of the main trails and Injun in," said Ware.

They prowled down the dark distance, stopping every hundred yards or so to keen the night with alert and straining senses. In time the stage station buildings grew solid before them. That single light glowed on, a watchful, malignant orb.

Now Ware and Maidlie were but crouched, and soft stealing shadows. At every step they half-expected a challenge or alarm to crash through the silence. The breathless tension pulled their nerves to a hard, keen edge.

Once when they paused Slide Maidlie murmured:

"It may be exactly like Kron said, then again mebbe the setup has changed since Kron and Harmon left for town. We may bump into more guns than we think. Either way, once we start, speed will be the main thing. For there's no tellin' about a snake like Dave Grande. Cornered, with the black ace lookin' him in the eye, he might hit at the girl. And it would be small comfort to us to smoke him down, if he'd throwed a shot at Miss Loren first. This is for keeps, boy."

"Yeah," gritted Ware. "For keeps!"

Abruptly Ware and Maidlie went down, flat on their faces. For, from out behind the station buildings where the old corrals stood, came a dark surge of riders, nearly a score of them. For a moment Ware thought that he and Maidlie had been spotted and that these riders were racing to ride them down, crush them. Instinct screamed at him to rise up and go to work with that Winchester rifle of his. But Slide Maidlie's hand on his arm steadied him, held him quiet.

The riders pounded past, so close that the churned-up dust was an acrid, invisible cloud to sting their eyes and lay a bitter flavor in their nostrils and throat. Ware and Maidlie never moved until the last echo of hoofs had faded in the dark distance.

THERE was no mistaking now the mission of that group of riders. The preciseness of their direction told that. There rode the combined forces of the Flat Y and the Block H. Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell were away for the surprise attack and planned capture of the Hat headquarters. Milo Kron had not lied.

"Lucky we decided to leave our hosses back a distance," murmured Slide Maidlie. "Else we'd have ridden right into the middle of that crowd. Well, there rides the big play for the Hat, Logan. One thing—Tex will have plenty of time to reach home and get set with the boys. Tex is a pretty wise old juniper. Somethin' tells me he's going to have a right smart reception cooked up for that gang."

So now Ware and Maidlie went on, caution slowing their pace as they cut the distance down. That yellow eye of light became the rectangle of a window. Ware stopped Maidlie and whispered the layout of the place to him, for this was Maidlie's first visit to Guenoc. There was a door, the main door, just to the left of that window, a door that was closed now and which opened inward.

In whispers they debated the advisability of attack from the rear of the place, but discarded this idea, for it would mean blind, dark fumbling through strange rooms before they could reach the barroom where the light lived. No, their best chance was sudden, merciless, smashing attack from the front, based on surprise.

It was legitimate to believe surprise was on their side. For Grande would not know of the happenings in town. He would not know that Fred Harmon was dead, that Milo Kron was a captive and had talked.

Grande would believe that all the Hat crew were riding far and wide in search of Loren Rudd, suspecting many things but hardly expecting her to be held by him at Guenoc. For all Logan Ware knew, Dave Grande would think, Grande had skipped the country, as he had been ordered to do. Ware would not know that in this plot for the overthrow of the Hat that Dave Grande was the main instigator and plotter, and that Black Tom Gaddy was in it along with Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell.

These, Ware reasoned, could be Dave Grande's conclusions, and in whispered words he outlined them to Slide Maidlie.

They moved on, cutting the distance

between them and the buildings to a hundred yards, then fifty yards. Abruptly the door of the place opened and against the light loomed the hulking figure of Spade Orcutt. He had a rifle across one arm. He paused there a moment, listening to a remark made by someone in the room behind him, and giving growling answer.

Then he closed the door and the ancient boards of the porch creaked under his stride. His head and shoulders showed momentarily against the light from the window, then he passed into the darkness beyond. Chair legs grated and rawhide lacings creaked under the bulk of a sitting man's weight.

So that was that. Spade Orcutt was settled in a chair as guard and lookout against the blackness of that hostile wall. This did not make the task of Logan Ware and Slide Maidlie any simpler.

They did not need to trade whispered conference any longer. Both understood fully what had to be done. They went in, inch by inch, foot by foot. Their rifles they left lying in the dust behind them. This would be six-gun work, close and fast.

Twenty yards from the edge of the porch. Ten yards.

Then, dull and brutish as he was, Spade Orcutt knew the stirrings of animal instinct against danger. They heard him stir uneasily, heard the small, metallic snick as he drew back the hammer of his rifle. These sounds placed him.

"Now!" Slide Maidlie said.

They shot almost together, Ware and Maidlie. The combined roar of report splintered the breathless quiet of the night like a thunder blast. Then they were up and rushing in. "Mind the hitchrail, Slide!" Ware was shouting.

They ducked under this, as Spade Orcutt, cut through and through by two heavy slugs, staggered blindly to the edge of the low porch, off it and against the hitchrail, over which he jacknifed and hung limply.

WARE and Maidlie crossed the porch in long leaps, smashed into the door, their combined weight almost tearing it off its hinges as it crashed open. Then, before the deadly roll of guns began a final tolling, clear and sharp and brief as the flicker of a camera shutter they saw the lighted room and what it held.

Three men at a table with cards between them, and with whisky glasses at their elbows. Dave Grande, Black Tom Gaddy, and Morry Seever.

Seever, small, tight, venomous as a snake, reacted with the speed of one striking. He seemed to bounce from his chair, had a gun out and going all in the same move. The glare of the weapon was straight at Logan Ware, and the shock of the bullet spun Ware half-around, his left arm and shoulder going numb. But Ware shot across his turning body before Seever could chop down a second time.

Seever, while still moving, seemed to have struck an invisible, immovable obstacle. He put out a foot which seemed to be exploring for some dark and substanceless support and, finding none, buckled under him. Then he fell, loosely.

It seemed strange to hear Slide Maidlie laughing, between the first and second shots he threw, lightning fast. But Maidlie was laughing at Dave Grande, without mirth, but laughing just the same. For into Grande's cold black eyes had leaped the stupefying realization that here before him was the black ace of death, that here was the end of all plans, all scheming, all of everything.

These things lay stark and naked in the look of him while Black Tom Gaddy died swiftly under the unerring smash of Slide Maidlie's first slug. Then the second slug ripped into Grande, knocking him half out of his chair.

At the far end of the bar a narrow stairway led upward to the second story. And Dave Grande, recovering from that first drive of Maidlie's lead, made for those stairs in a lurching stagger, drawing a gun as he went.

It was a strange and blood curdling thing, this move of Grande's. He seemed to have forgotten Logan Ware and Slide Maidlie. His purpose was to climb those stairs and in the obsession of this last mad, malignant move he made no attempt to throw a shot at either of them.

He was dying on his feet, but he got to the third step before he wavered under the combined impact of lead from the avenging guns in the hands of Ware and Maidlie. Then the dark, poisonous spirit ran out of him. He fell against the slope of the stairs, turned partly over and slid down to the floor where he lay still, a huddled lifeless shape.

Silence that was almost explosive settled down momentarily.

Then Maidlie said, "I told yuh it would be that way, Logan. We'll find Miss Loren somewheres beyond those stairs."

Ware stepped over Grande and climbed into the dark of a narrow hallway above, a hall full of trapped heat and musty air. He staggered a little, bewildered at the effort it cost him to make the climb, and at the weaving unevenness of this hall floor. He dropped his gun, got a sulphur match from his pocket, scratched it to a small, flickering flame.

A door loomed on his right, open and black. Ware lurched through it, holding the match high. The room was empty. He spun into the hall again, saw another door, this one closed, before the match flickered out. He threw his right shoulder against the locked door, heard it creak and protest.

"Loren!" he called. "Loren girl!" His voice was thick and hoarse.

He heard her answer, her voice small at first, then with a rising note of relief and joy.

"Here, Logan—in here! Oh, Logan Ware—Logan Ware!"

He reeled back, then smashed the door again. Ancient wood splintered and he was through, falling to one knee.

"Loren," he mumbled again.

Then the floor jumped up and smashed him in the face, and everything trailed off into black, swirling shadows. . . .

THREE weeks later Ware got out of his bunk at Hat headquarters. Slide Maidlie and Tex Fortune helped him dress. They had to loop his shirt over his left arm and shoulder which were still stiff with bandages.

Tex was cussing him gruffly.

"Doc Abbey said yuh should have at least another week in the blankets before tryin' to be up and around. But you can be the blamedest, most bullheaded hombre alive!"

"If I stayed in bed another minute I'd be as loco as a jaybird," retorted Ware. "Anybody would think I'd really sopped up some lead instead of just havin' a smidgin little hole through my shoulder."

"Huh!" snorted Tex. "It ain't the hole so much as it is the blood that came out of it. Yuh lost enough to supply three men. Well, it's yore funeral. If yuh go all weak and wobbly and fall on your stubborn mug, remember I warned yuh. Hey, Slide?"

Slide Maidlie grinned. "You warned him, Tex. But he seems to be doin' pretty good."

Ware stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse, looking across the open, sun-swept space between it and the main ranchhouse. Empty, peaceful and still was that spread of honest earth now. But there had been one savage night. . . .

Tex had told him all about it, what had happened at Hat headquarters

while he and Maidlie had been in Guenoc. Tex had put half his men in the ranchhouse and spread the rest around among the other ranch buildings. Then they had waited and let Mize Huncutt and Dobe Yarnell and their combined outfits come in. They had made no effort to stop Huncutt and Yarnell at the outer limits of headquarters.

They had lain still and quiet and let the raiders believe the spread empty of men, had let them believe that every able-bodied rider was out, looking for a fair-haired girl who had gone for a ride and who had not come home. And not until Huncutt and Yarnell and their men, elated at what seemed to be easy conquest, had massed in that open space between ranchhouse and bunkhouse, had Tex given the order to open up.

It had been short, savage, and decisive. Dobe Yarnell had died under the first smashing volley. Ten seconds later Mize Huncutt had gone out of his saddle with a rifle bullet through both hips. Mize Huncutt had not died, so the word was, but he would never walk or ride again. And with both their leaders down and other men dropping on all sides, the survivors had broken madly for far distance and safety. The last battle had been fought, and the Hat was still the Hat.

And now the world was bright and warm and still with peace.

Over in back of the ranchhouse Mother Sutton was gathering a basket of snowy wash off a line. She looked at Logan Ware gravely as he came slowly up.

"Is this wise, boy?" she asked gently. "You gave us some anxious moments, you know."

Ware grinned. "Gettin' stronger by the minute. Where is Loren?"

"Up at the buryin' ground, I believe. She's been doing a lot of caring for her father's grave in the last week."

Ware started that way, thinking how good the sun felt on his bared head, how the warmth of it beat through and brought comfort to his healing shoulder. A little breeze came running up the valley, a small, lazy breeze, friendly and sweet with the breath of space and sunshine. Ware turned his face to it and let it wash all through him.

Then he saw her, coming down the slope toward him, her fair hair shining in the sun. Concern was in her eyes and a gentle scolding on her lips.

"Foolish man! Do you want to be flat on your back again?"

He looked at her so long and steadily that she colored warmly. But her eyes held steady and honest, and marvelously soft.

"Only one thing I want," he said. "You. I reckon yuh've known that for a long time, Loren, but I wanted to say it and find out if there was any hope for me. We've seen rough times together, you and me, but that's all past and done with now. And now yuh've got yore ranch as yuh would want it to be, peaceful and quiet and safe."

"Yes," she said, "that is so. And what gave it to me? Why, one man's faith. Yours. You kept faith with my father, you kept faith with me, with your friends, your crew and yourself. There must be reward for faith like that. There is, Logan."

She came close to him, looking up at him.

"Faith is reward in itself, girl," he said, "yuh owe me nothin' as a reward."

She smiled wisely. "You should know me better than that. Why, my dear, I've loved you from the night you kissed me, rough and harsh and rather terrible. But honest, always honest. Remember? That night out at the patio entrance?"

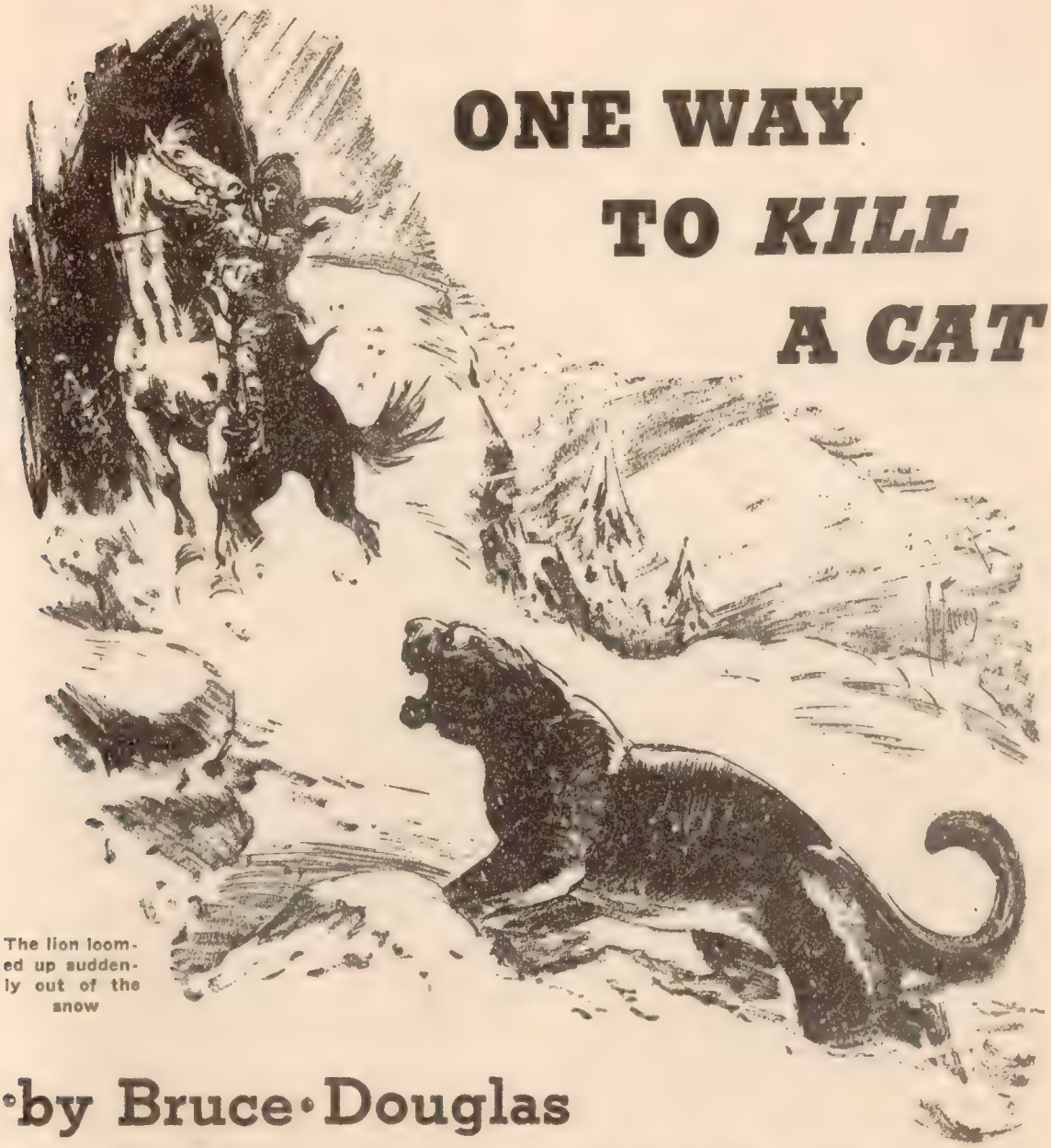
"Remember!" His voice went slightly husky. "I've done nothin' but remember."

His sound arm was about her as she cupped his face in both soft palms, pulled it down and kissed him.

"That makes us even," she murmured.

Old Angus and Young Bill almost split up their partnership before they learn that there's more than—

ONE WAY TO *KILL* A CAT



The lion loomed up suddenly out of the snow

•by Bruce• Douglas

LIKE a prairie fire which smolders for long hours in the grass roots before bursting suddenly into a leaping wall of flames, the old smoldering argument flared suddenly to a towering climax, and both were saying things they only half meant and would bitterly regret.

They faced each other—Young Bill Donnelly and dour old Angus MacGregor—in the front room of the sturdy old log ranch-house and glared across the table on which lay the metal lock-box full of money. Young Bill's tanned face was flushed with resentment. Old Angus' puckered lips were

drawn together in a thin line, and his sun-faded blue eyes were cold as bits of Arctic ice.

Secretly old Angus was proud of the fact that Young Bill, son of his dead partner Old Bill Donnelly, had gone away to college to learn all the new scientific wrinkles of horse raising. Secretly he was flattered that Young Bill had chosen to return to his share in a run-down, debt-ridden horse ranch instead of starting out on his own in any of a hundred grassy valleys just as good as this one. But he was taking no orders from an opinionated, downy-cheeked young whippersnapper not yet dry behind the ears; and he had just said so in no uncertain terms.

In other words, after putting in a quarter of a century partnering with Old Bill Donnelly, Angus could not bring himself to realize that Young Bill was a full grown man and yield him his right to share equally in making decisions and running the ranch.

"No!" old Angus rasped. "No! And again no! 'Tis one thing to bring back new ideas and new methods, some of which I can not deny are good. 'Tis another to show the white feather and back away from a fight. Little did I think that the son of Bill Donnelly would turn out to be a coward!"

He stopped suddenly, his lips still parted. His eyes widened, and were remorseful and apologetic. But the words had been spoken.

Color drained from Young Bill's face. Silence held between them, a silence electric in its intensity, broken only by the ticking of the antique clock on the ranch-house wall. Young Bill's jaw squared. His eyes were no longer hot with anger. They were cold now, cold as old Angus' had been a moment before.

"Coward, is it?" he said. "There are other ways of settling trouble than by ramming headlong into it like a wall-eyed cayuse full of loco weed, and I've tried for weeks to show you one of 'em. Profitable, too. First Scot I ever heard of who couldn't see which side of his bread the butter was on. But, no. You have to bow your neck and bull it through, like the hard-headed old fool that you are! Well, you can bull it through alone, understand? Count me out!"

TURNING on his heel, Young Bill strode out of the house and across the open space to the corral. He walked stiffly, his straight back showing nothing of the regret which flooded him now that the break was made. But the familiar outlines of smithy, tool shed, bunkhouse and corral wavered before his eyes in a sudden mist.

Old Angus came out of the ranch-house and moved slowly over to the corral. Young Bill was cutting his favorite horse out of the cavvy. Angus watched as the young man threw a saddle on the horse and deftly tightened the cinch strap.

"Billy," he said. "Billy, mebbe I was a bit hasty."

Young Bill gave no sign of having heard. Leaving the horse in the corral, he made his way back to the ranch-house and entered. When he came out four or five minutes later, old Angus was standing on the hard-packed earth in front of the stoop.

This time he merely made a silent gesture with upturned palms, without speaking.

Without looking at him Young Bill went back to the corral and climbed aboard his horse. He was clad in a heavy fleece-lined mackinaw, with a gray woollen muffler wound about his throat. He looked calmly down at the old man, showing neither anger nor affection.

For Angus' benefit he had made his face intentionally expressionless, and that was all the old man could see.

"You don't believe a word I've said," Young Bill stated. "You're dead set on takin' that money in to town along the

valley trail, and I can't stop you. But I do think my warning should make you keep an eye out for bushwackers, even if you don't expect them to show up, as I do."

Old Angus started. "Billy, if—if this is—th' end between us," he stammered, 'if you're goin' away, then half that money in the lock-box is yours."

"Take it on in to the bank," Young Bill answered curtly. "I'm going in over the high pass—the way you say can't be done. If I'm not in town when you get there, you can tell the bank to open a separate account for me with half the money."

He rode slowly out toward the main trail, facing toward the high notch just below the mass of dark cloud which veiled the twin peaks at the head of the valley, and trotted briskly along the gently rising trail.

Young Bill threw the mackinaw wide open and unwrapped the muffler from aroun dhis neck. It was late September, and though a mist from the clouds over the mountains had spread out to obscure the sun, there was still an Indian summer warmth in the valley. But he would need both mackinaw and muffler in the high pass, and he knew it.

"I'll show him!" he said aloud. "He just claims those clouds mean a blizzard in the high pass because he wants to bull his way through on th' valley trail, the stubborn fool!"

But his dark eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he studied the slate-gray mass of cloud obscuring the twin peaks. The pass was still visible beneath the cloud mass. But would it lower, to blot out all visibility? And if it did, would he be groping his way through heavy fog —or through sleet and snow? He pushed the disturbing questions out of his mind; and as the trail lifted more steeply upward, his mind was engrossed with the whole complicated problem which had resulted in this final quarrel and split.

The final quarrel had started that morning at breakfast, when Young Bill had again brought up the question of buying an expensive thoroughbred stallion and two fine blooded mares. But the roots of the quarrel went back far beyond that. Young Bill, orphaned while he was in college, had returned only a few months ago to his father's partner to take hold of the run-down, debt-ridden horse ranch and try to set it back on its feet. The problem included two horse ranches, one at each end of Wild Horse Valley on privately owned land, and between them, a wide stretch of public range that was overcrowded with horses from both ranches. It included Tom Nelson, owner of the other horse ranch, and it included a horse buyer named "Lynx" Renfro.

OLD Bill and old Angus had run their business the way Western horse ranches had been run from time immemorial. Each spring, traveling sometimes as much as a hundred miles away from Wild Horse Valley, they had put on a great roundup of wild horses on the high plains. Returning with their catch of broomtail cayuses, they had thrown them onto the home range, and spent the summer breaking them to saddle. In the fall, fattened by a summer's grazing and at least partially tamed, the horses were sold as low-grade work-horse saddle stock.

It worked fine—for a while. Then trouble arose because Tom Nelson, at the other end of Wild Horse Valley, was doing the same thing; and between them they had overcrowded the valley until the grass began to peter out. As a result the horses which both ranches offered for sale were skinny and half-starved looking; and the owners had to take any price they could get. Lynx Renfro, the horse buyer, was sitting soft and pretty. He could offer any price he chose for the horses he bought, and the prices he offered were ruinously low.

Naturally, the situation was bound to

create strife between the two ranches. Only a week or so before, Tom Nelson had ridden over to spill some hot words about overcrowding the free range. Old Angus and Young Bill had sold Lynx Renfro every horse they owned in Wild Horse Valley for a lump sum big enough to pay off the note which was coming due at the bank and leave a couple of thousand dollars over.

Tom Nelson had warned them not to bring in as many wild ones next spring as they had this year. And old Angus had replied spiritedly that he'd bring in twice as many mustangs next year if he wanted to, that it was Nelson who was overcrowding the free range, and that if he wanted to make something of it he'd mighty quick find that Angus could hire as salty a bunch of gun-swift horse wranglers as Nelson could.

It was because of this interchange of left-handed pleasantries that old Angus had turned a deaf ear to Young Bill's suggested solution.

"Look," Young Bill said that evening after Angus had told him about the squabble. "You can't cure an overcrowded range by crowding it some more. The point is there's just so much grass in this valley. The thing we've got to do is put it to better use."

"Meanin'?" old Angus demanded.

"Meaning just this," Young Bill replied, warming to his subject. "It takes just as much grass to graze a ten-dollar mustang as it does to graze an expensive thoroughbred. I just learned in town today about a fine horse farm back East that's selling out. After we pay the bank, we'll have enough money to buy three of their horses—a thoroughbred stud named Baron, and two blooded mares, Belladonna and Castaway. We can raise the corn and oats and other fodder we need on our own land. Why, we've got enough private owned land to take care of expansion for the next fifty years! All we need to do is run a fence around our property to keep Nelson's broomtails away from our fine stock, and let him do what he pleases with the free range. We'll have no use for any of it."

"Wha-a-aat?" Old Angus' voice was almost a scream. "Back down? Knuckle under to Nelson? Let him have all the free range? Never!"

In vain Young Bill argued that his was the only sensible solution to their problem, and that it wasn't backing down to let another man have something you didn't need. Old Angus said no, and kept on saying no every time Young Bill raised the question—and he had raised it pretty often since that first time.

So when Young Bill raised it again that morning at breakfast, looking at his partner across the money that had to be taken in that day to pay their note at the bank, the stage was set for the quarrel which had ended in their separation.

Old Angus simply got into one of his stubborn moods and wouldn't listen to anything. He wouldn't even listen when Young Bill gave up and tried to change the subject by talking about the metal lock-box full of money on the table.

"I think," Young Bill said, waving a hand toward the lock-box, "that there's more here than meets the eye."

Old Angus merely grunted; but the subject was important, so Young Bill went on.

"Lynx Renfro paid us in cash, instead of with a draft. And he paid us here at the ranch, instead of in town at the bank. I think there's something behind it, Angus. He's stirred up bad feeling between you and Tom Nelson—I'm certain he was behind that. He's got things fixed so that each of you would blame the other for any horse stealin' that might happen—or any other crime.

"And Lynx knows we've got to get this cash to the bank before closing time this afternoon. There's only one main outlet from this valley around the

mountain to town, and I'm betting that somewhere along that trail there'll be bushwhackers waitin' to lift this cash box. In the mood you're in, you'd blame it on Nelson if it happened. Renfro would get his money back without danger of suspicion and could buy our ranch for a song after the bank foreclosed on the note. But I'm going to fool that slick jasper! While he's lying in wait somewhere along the valley trail, I'll be taking this money through the high pass! I'll have reached town and paid the note at the bank before he realizes what's happening!"

NO!" OLD Angus roared.

With the tactlessness of youth, Young Bill had practically called him a prejudiced old fool, and his Scot's blood was up. So was his accent. Whenever Angus lost his temper he invariably reverted to the broad dialect of his youth. "This whole thing is just a—a feegment o' your eemagination!" the old man raged. "Lynx Renfro is a guid mon; Old Bill an' I ha' dealt wi' him for years! Do ye set yoursel' up to be smarter than your own father, eh? Besides, ye canna get through the high pass. 'Twould be suicide to try. The clouds are pilin' up black for a blizzard up yon, and there'll be ten feet o' snow in the pass before mornin'!"

"I'd rather buck a blizzard than take a bullet in the back," Young Bill retorted stubbornly. "It won't snow before night, if it snows then. I can get through before it starts. I tell you, I'm taking that money over the pass!"

"You are not!"

Thus the flare-up began which ended in Young Bill's severing his connections with the ranch and starting out, as he had said he would, for the high pass. Deadlocked in a clash of wills in which neither man held the clear right of decision, Angus had finally harked back to the sore subject of thoroughbred horses and ended up by flinging that personal insult which could not be retracted.

As the trail ascended steeply through pine and spruce and birch and quivering aspen, Young Bill brooded angrily on old Angus' stubborn pig-headedness. Above that, above the wooded area, higher than the highest point at which a tree can live, the stark, bare jumble of soaring granite pinnacles and yawning chasms lifted to those minarets of eternal snows which overhung the pass on both sides. Dark, slate-gray cloud obscured the peaks, occasional wisps from that ominous blanket descending to caress Young Bill's cheek with promise of frigid blasts to come. A sudden, involuntary shiver twisted through him, and he drew his fleece-lined mackinaw close about him and wrapped his woollen muffler over his hat and twice about his neck.

"Rabbit must-a hopped across my grave," he muttered, then smiled at the hoary old superstition.

But the smile waned with the thought of death, and he looked somberly up through the thickening mists to a belt of treeless granite. There his father, Old Bill Donnelly, had met his death, clawed and mangled by a mountain lion he had trailed up to those barren rocks. It had happened while Young Bill was away at college. He was wondering now whether if the two of them had been together on that hunt, father and son, they might have killed the beast.

Snow—soft, fat, moist flakes—began to fall while Young Bill was still among tall pines, a good thousand feet below the level of the pass. In the windless atmosphere they fell straight down, whispered through the needles of the pines, muted, ominous. Thinking of old Angus and wondering if he would get through safely along the valley trail, Young Bill did not notice them at first. When he did become aware that a fat flake had settled on his bare wrist above the glove and melted there, he stiffened with sudden apprehension.

"It can't be!" he exclaimed, as though, by sheer force of will, he could

affect the elements. "Anyhow, this is just a flurry, not the start of winter. It'll stop soon, and melt off fast."

In spite of this self-reassurance he spurred his horse to a faster gait. The chief danger, he told himself, was in the remaining climb and in the pass itself. Winds as strong as fifty miles an hour sometimes howled through that narrow slot. If such a wind were to rise now, bearing this snow on its back, no man on earth could force his way through. Once through the pass, however, Young Bill was confident that no wind or snow, however bad, could stop his sure descent to the town below.

"I'll show him!" he muttered, thinking again of old Angus and their quarrel. "I've got to show him!"

He refused to allow his mind to dwell on the dire results of failure. Least among them, in his opinion, would be his own death, by freezing, in some cranny on the mountainside.

The snow was falling more thickly, and the flakes were smaller and harder. A light wind had sprung up, like the sigh of a waking giant, harbinger of icy blasts to come. It came in gusts, the snowy particles stinging his face, then subsiding to a moaning steadiness. The horse trumpeted often to clear his nostrils of the clinging stuff. Young Bill reined into a sheltered spot to give the animal a chance to breathe. With his gloved hand he gently brushed away the flakes from around the horse's eyes.

Here in the sheltered hollow the snow again fell straight to the ground. But the wind was rising. Above, in the notch of the grass, it howled and sang, the sound muted by the mass of falling snow. Young Bill's face was grim as, the short moment of rest over, he resolutely turned his horse upward into the blizzard.

"We'll make it," he muttered, knowing that most of the steep rise had been conquered. But he knew, too, that the snow-laden wind was howling through the pass as through a tunnel; and he wondered if the combined strength of horse and man could force a passage to the other side.

HARD, granular snow, too heavy to be called sleet, stung his face; and a numbing chill crept into his feet and legs. When he reached the level of the high pass, he dismounted and ran for a short distance beside his horse, stamping and waving his arms to restore the circulation. But he was soon breathless and had to mount again. The horse struggled gamely through deepening drifts.

There was no snow in the center of the pass, nothing but scurrying flakes like the spray from a pressure hose. But the mighty impact of the snow-laden wind met them when they ventured out into that driftless area, and buffeted them and thrust them back until they had to turn again and once more plow through the hampering drifts.

Young Bill could no longer dismount and run beside his horse. He could do no more than hunch low in the saddle and leave the struggle to his tired animal. His arms and legs were numb, quite without feeling now; and the driven snow beat against his cheeks without sensation. Pain wracked him as the blood flowed through his veins with a prickling as from a thousand fiery needles.

At long last, there was no longer level ground beneath the horse's hoofs. From here on, the trail spiraled downward in great loops and switchbacks, flanked by steep slopes and dizzying precipices. Somewhere below, out of sight in the blinding flurry of snow and wind, the town nestled at the foot of the mountains. The wind ripped and tore at Young Bill as if it would beat him from his saddle. But from now on the trail led down.

A feeling of elation and triumph rose in Young Bill's heart.

"We made it!" he exulted. "The worst is behind us now! From now on,

nothing can stop us!"

And at that very moment, in the very instant of his triumph, disaster struck.

The horse was moving downward along a narrow, slippery trail flanked on one side by an almost perpendicular cliff and on the other by a drop almost equally abrupt. A few gnarled, stunted trees, scarcely more than bushes, projected blackly from the drifted snow on the down slope. Some twenty feet below the level of the trail a precipitous chasm, ten feet wide, received the falling snow.

It was at this point, where keeping a slippery footing on the narrow trail spelled the difference between life and death, that the mountain lion showed up!

Caught in the high hunting ranges by the sudden blizzard, the great cat, unable to breast the howling gale, was running with the wind, heading for the comparative shelter of the lee side of the mountain. She loomed up suddenly out of the blinding snow, scarcely ten feet ahead, snarling and snapping at the gusts of hard, granular snow which buffeted her. Horse and lion glimpsed each other at almost the same moment. The lion halted, back humped, nails digging into the ice. Trumpeting its terror, the horse reared straight up on its hind legs and pawed the air.

Young Bill jerked at the reins, striving to turn the horse somehow and head back up the trail. But the numbness of his fingers made him fumble and served only to increase the terror of the animal. With every trick of an experienced horseman Young Bill struggled to overcome his mount's nervousness. He was slowly succeeding. Held perpendicular by the tightened reins, the horse was slowly turning about. But just in the moment of success a worse calamity overtook them. Standing within a few inches of the steep drop at the edge of the trail, the horse's metal shoe slipped on glare ice, and horse and rider were instantly launched into space.

The snarl of the angry lion sounded in Young Bill's ears as he freed his feet from the stirrups and threw himself sideways. Then all sound stopped as he plunged in snow. Deeper and deeper he sank into the drift, until it packed beneath him and he lay still. Snow pressed in on all sides, filling his eyes and ears, choking him. Beating with his arms, he made a breathing space, then slowly, with his numbed hands, began scooping his way out. At last he lay panting on the snow, half in and half out of the drift. He looked about him, sizing up the perilous situation.

DIRECTLY below him, only a few feet from the yawning chasm, a single stunted tree stuck out of the drift. It was this, he saw, which had prevented him from sliding into the chasm to his death. The horse had not been so lucky; a scraped, snowless place at the lip of the chasm showed where it had gone over the edge.

Grimly Young Bill considered his chances. Afoot, almost up at the level of the high pass, the blizzard unabated, and the cat— What had happened to the mountain lion? An angry snarl answered the unspoken question. Young Bill glanced quickly upward. Fifteen feet up the steep slope, clinging to the edge of the trail, the great beast, seeming almost twice the size of the ordinary mountain lion, was glaring down at him. Young Bill's eyes narrowed, and he groped for the gun in his belt.

This was no ordinary beast: this was a killer, the kind that would carry the fight to man, instead of waiting to be attacked. With sudden clarity Young Bill realized that this must be the same animal which had clawed his father to death, and a kind of unreasoning rage flooded him. Though the only possible way to safety lay along that trail where the lion crouched, he was unreasoningly glad that the beast had not gone on

when the way was cleared for it to go. Bringing out the gun, he forced a numb finger to crook around the trigger.

"Come on, you murdering devil!" he grated and pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit the edge of the trail, sending a stinging splatter of stone and ice into the lion's side. The huge beast screamed with rage and sprang straight for him.

Young Bill threw himself quickly sidewise into the drift, his fingers grabbing for a precarious hold on a gnarled, scrubby bit of brush. A weight like a ton of ore descended crushingly on his legs, then lifted again as the whole slanting snowdrift began to slide downward. Young Bill clung desperately to the gnarled brush. Then with a roar which sounded above the howling wind, a hundred tons of snow, bearing on its surface the snarling mountain lion, fell into the yawning chasm and disappeared.

Again Young Bill looked slowly about, taking stock of the situation. His legs were hanging over the lip of the chasm; and he gingerly pulled them up. Then he lay flat on his stomach and began worming his way slowly up toward the trail. Reaching it finally, he stood up on feet that were like chunks of ice. He beat the snow from his mackinaw and muffler and drew them more closely about him. Then he faced determinedly down the trail.

"It's all downhill from now on," he said aloud and took comfort from the sound of his own voice. The pressure of wind-driven snow on his numb body seemed to be a little less than before. The storm had begun to abate.

A little before the hour of four, closing time for cow-country banks, Young Bill weaved clumsily into town like a man on stilts. His head was swimming and he picked his way like a drunken man, his dark, determined eyes peering through clotted snow as from ice caverns. His nose and cheeks were stiff and discolored from frostbite; and the sluggish movement of half-congealed blood through his veins sent a steady, dull pain through his whole body.

With his last remaining strength he staggered to the door of the bank, put the whole weight of his body against it, and fell motionless in a heap on the floor inside.

IT WAS night before they got him to the little three-bed hospital in the home of the local medico. Young Bill had insisted he had things to do. After his initial collapse, he had summoned, from somewhere in his tired body, enough strength to do them. He was smiling when they finally got him into one of the three beds. He smiled even more broadly when he spotted old Angus in another of the beds and was told by the doctor that Angus' wounds were not serious.

"You were right, Angus," Young Bill said, lying flat on his back and staring up at the ceiling. "There are ten feet of snow in the high pass by now. It's the real start of winter, and no mistake. I almost failed to get through."

"Ah, laddie!" Old Angus' tone was apologetic and humble. "And now you're here, I have no money to divide with ye! Because you were right, too. They jumped me like ye said they would. They'd-a killed me outright if I hadn't had an eye out for 'em because o' your warnin'. But they killed my horse, and I had to run away on foot to save my life. They got the lock-box out o' th' saddlebag, so now the ranch is lost, too, because this was the last day to pay the note at the bank."

"Too bad," Young Bill said, still looking straight up at the ceiling. "Too bad. But you were losing money handling broomtail cayuses, and would have gone on losing more every year. Might as well lose the ranch now as later. Now, if you had been planning to change over to thoroughbreds, where you could really make a profit, that would-a been a different matter."

Old Angus sighed. "You're right, laddie," he answered meekly. "You've got a good level head on your shoulders. There's more than one way to kill a cat, and your way was the right one. I thought it over while I was on the trail and decided ye were right. I was goin' to ask ye to come back and raise fine horses when I met ye in the bank. But it's too late now. That lock-box—"

"That lock-box," young Bill interrupted dryly, "contained about a dozen copies of the *Horse Breeders' Journal.* I paid our note at the bank just before it closed. I told you I was going to take that money over the high pass—and I did."

"You—you *wha-aa-at?*" old Angus screeched, sitting straight up in bed and glaring across at Young Bill. "Why, you bull-headed, opinionated young—"

The doctor thrust his head in at the door. "Here, here!" he exclaimed. "Stop that, or you'll work up a fever. You two stop all that talking right now and go to sleep!"

He came in, turned out the oil lamp on the table, and went out again, leaving the room in darkness.

"I met Tom Nelson in town an hour ago and explained our plan," Young Bill said. "He was so tickled to be shown a peaceful way to settle the trouble between our ranches that he offered to pay the cost of the fence between our owned land and the free range. He's going to send men out to start building it in the morning. Oh, yes, another thing. I sent a telegram to that Eastern horse farm telling them to ship those three thoroughbreds C.O.D."

He lay there, grinning up into the darkness, listening to old Angus' labored breathing. The old man sounded like a teakettle ready to explode. But when he finally spoke, his voice was mild and with a strong undercurrent of the old affection.

"That's fine, Billy," old Angus said, then finished with a word he had not used since Old Bill Donnelly had died. "That's fine—partner."

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

SKEETER BILL COMES TO TOWN

A Rip-Snorting Complete Novelet

By W. C. TUTTLE

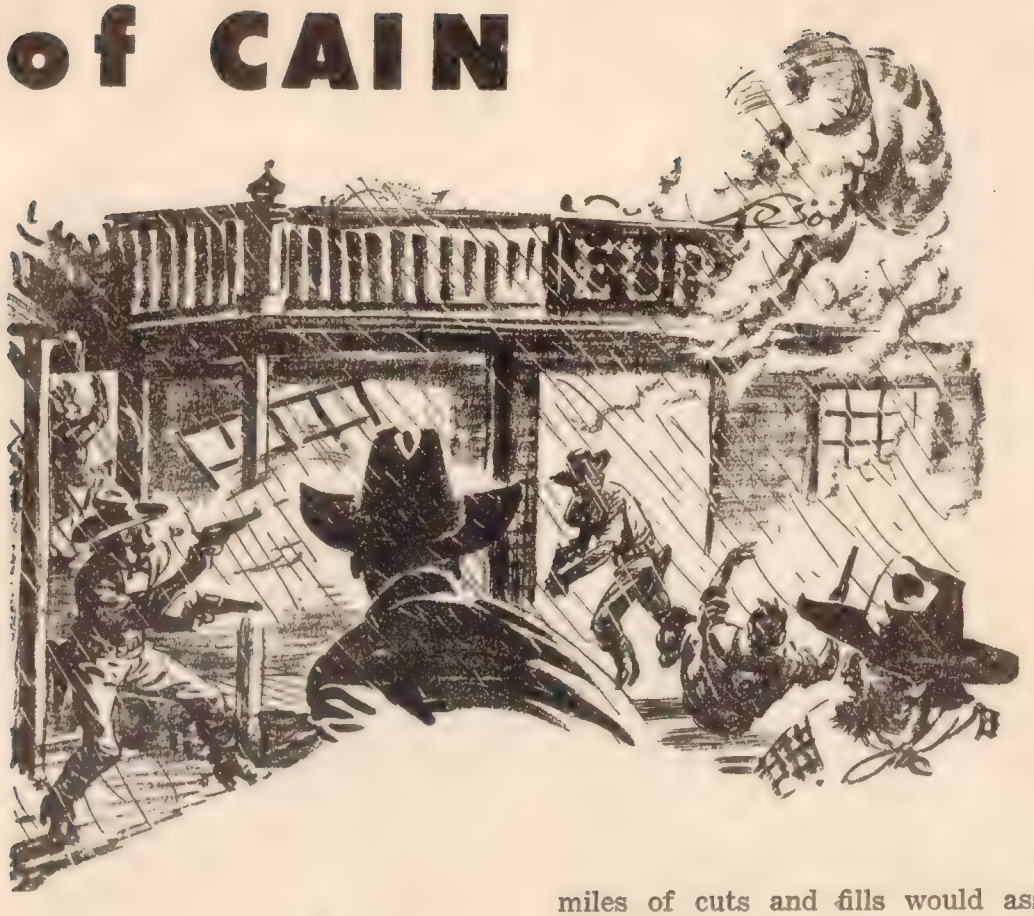
•

the MARK

Carrying Clare in his arms, Streak looked back and saw flames

Swift-shooting Streak Malone enlists his legendary guns in a hot-lead campaign to clean up the terror town of Silver Butte!

# of CAIN



a novelet by **W. C. TUTTLE**

I

VERY well known to the Frontier are the words:

"The Vigilantes are operating in Silver Butte, and have already killed the sheriff."

That statement was repeated in far-flung places in the West—around the camp-fires of the buffalo hunters, at the chuckwagons with the trail herds, and in the hideouts of the outlaw clan. Men, working outside the law, avoided the Vigilantes.

Silver Butte! A booming railroad town. A huge bridge, a long tunnel, miles of cuts and fills would assure Silver Butte of a long-time payroll. Silver Butte had been known as a bad-man's town.

Down along the rough roads, cut deep by freighter's wagons, came "Streak" Malone, tall in his saddle, riding a tall, blue-gray outlaw horse—a horse with the head of a rattler and the disposition of the Devil. Only Streak Malone could touch this brute, which obeyed every signal from its master.

Malone was just over six feet tall, lithe as a cat, ruggedly handsome, his coal-black hair split in the center with a two-inch streak of pure white. His high-crowned sombrero was decorated

with a wide, silver-studded band, his vest was beaded in intricate designs, and his shirt was of almost-white doeskin, a present from a Sioux woman. He wore black boots with silver spurs, and his holstered gun was silver inlaid by a master silversmith.

No one knew where Streak Malone came from. He never spoke of his past, and he came into the West several years ahead of the railroad. He was barely thirty years of age, but his face held deep lines, and his eyes were deep under heavy brows.

A hard pair, this streak-haired man and the outlaw horse, but Streak Malone was never outside the law. Horsebreaker, trapper, buffalo hunter, gambler—he never stayed long in any place. Something seemed to lure him on, and now he was riding into Silver Butte. He, too, had heard of the Vigilantes of that part of the Territory, but the Vigilantes conveyed no fear to Streak Malone.

Until the coming of the railroad, Silver Butte was merely a cowtown with one short crooked street, but now it was a booming place of tent-houses, shacks of every description, and more building every day. The main street was ankle-deep in dust, teeming with freight wagons, pack outfits, cowboy riders and a few lighter vehicles.

The biggest building was the Silver Dollar Saloon and Gambling Palace. Less than a block away was another large building, nearly completed, with men working feverishly. A huge sign, ready to swing into place read: EUREKA SALOON AND GAMBLING HALL.

STREAK MALONE was almost obliged to ride over the wooden sidewalks, in order to avoid the traffic. In front of the stage office a man yelled his name, and he drew up. He vaguely remembered seeing the man in Bismark a year ago, and waved a greeting.

He found an opening between two freight wagons, and spurred across the street and continued on to a feed-corral. The man in charge said:

"Turn yore horse loose in the corral, stranger, and hang yore saddle in the stable."

"Wait a minute, my friend," replied Streak. "I've got to have a stall for this horse, and I'll take care of him myself."

"Ain't the corral good enough?" The man was inclined to resent Streak's words.

"This horse will try to kill any man who touches him," explained Streak. "Tell everybody to keep away from him."

"I've got an empty stall," said the man. "Much obliged."

Streak walked out of the stable and met the man who had called to him. Streak looked closely at the man, who spoke quietly.

"I own the general store here," said the man. "You're Streak Malone. I'm Jim Buskirk."

"I remember you," said Streak. "Bismark, a year or so ago."

"Good! We've been lookin' for a man like you, Malone."

Streak's eyes hardened, and his right hand dropped naturally over the butt of his holstered gun. The man grinned and shook his head quickly. "Nothin' like that," he said quietly. "Come to my store at dark, and I'll take yuh where we can talk to other men."

"I don't reckon I understand this deal, my friend."

"Look across the street at that sign on the sheriff's office."

It was painted in big, black letters and read:

CLOSED BY ORDER OF THE VIGILANTES

Streak nodded. "Plain enough," he remarked.

"The sheriff," said Buskirk, "was an honest man. They shot him down in his office."

"The Vigilantes don't usually kill an innocent man," remarked Streak. "I

heard they are operatin' here."

"But don't yuh understand?" asked Buskirk quietly. "There's no Vigilantes. I mean, not honest ones. The sheriff was murdered."

"Oh, I see," nodded Streak. "Wolves in sheep clothing."

"That's it exactly. Will you meet with us?"

Streak smiled. In town ten minutes, and already included in some mystery. He said, "I'll be there, Buskirk—at dark."

The man nodded and crossed the street, while Streak walked up past the feed corral, and stopped to look at the new construction of the Eureka Saloon. They were unloading the sections of a huge, mahogany bar from freight wagons. The dismantled bar had been shipped by steamer from St. Louis, and picked up from a Missouri River boat. A man said:

"The Eureka shore spent a fortune on that stuff. Imagine a mahogany bar in Silver Butte. Pearls before swine, I calls it."

Streak smiled and crossed the street to the one hotel in the town, where he was lucky enough to get a room. The clerk said:

"Are you one of the new Eureka gamblers?"

Streak shook his head. "Do I look like a gambler?" he asked.

"Yuh can't tell about looks. I see they're bringin' in real furniture for the new saloon. Cost a lot of money. Jim Flack is a top gambler, but he'll have plenty of action, buckin' Zero Brant. Brant jist about runs Silver Butte. We wondered why he didn't try to stop Jim Flack from buildin' the Eureka, but maybe he figures to break Flack in one swipe."

"What do you mean by that?"asked Streak.

"Nothin', stranger. Mebbe I talk too much—I dunno."

Streak went back to the doorway, watching the activity on the street. A young cowboy was standing just away from the doorway, and a girl came down the street to meet him. She was pretty, but looked tired. There was so much noise on the street that they did not expect to be overheard.

"I've been watchin' for yuh, Mazie," the boy said. "Near the Silver Dollar."

"I couldn't get away, Joe," she replied wearily. "They wanted me to learn a new song."

"Let's pull out," the boy suggested. "Mazie, I've got folks down in St. Louis. We can get married and go there. We don't have to live in this hell hole."

THE girl's smile was as sweet as anything Streak had ever seen, but she shook her head. "Not yet, Joe. We haven't enough money. Mr. Flack offered me more money to sing in the Eureka, but I don't know what to do. Zero Brant heard about it, and he told me I'd better stay with him, if I know what's good for me. What do you think I should do, Joe?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Brant is a bad man and he might do you dirt. Better wait and see what happens when the Eureka opens."

They drifted away together into the dust cloud which hung like a pall over Silver Butte. Streak Malone drew a deep breath. Love in a place like this! He was curious to see "Zero" Brant, the bad-man. He walked toward the Silver Dollar.

Zero Brant was worth more than a passing glance, as he stood at the bar in the Silver Dollar Saloon. There were big men in there, but Zero Brant dwarfed them all. Clad in the raiment of a typical gambler, he looked like the common conception of a cave-man, huge of arm and limb, slightly stooped, a bullet-shaped head on a thick neck, green, predatory eyes, and a face of solid granite.

Gripped in one corner of his gash-like mouth was a frayed-out cigar, while in one huge paw he held a glass

of liquor. No man had ever whipped Zero Brant. He and his gun-men ruled Silver Butte. It was a small domain for a king like Zero, but he had ideas. It was a starter—and the West was young. The huge room was overflowing with construction workers, cowboys, buffalo hunters and the usual riff-raff which followed the construction work.

A woman came down through the crowded room, and the men moved aside to let her pass. Swishing silks and glittering jewels marked the passing of Conchita. She was a striking figure in that tawdry place, the offspring of a Spanish father and an Irish mother. Someone had once said, "I didn't know that the Devil was Irish."

Rounded, big hipped, small ankles and small feet, she moved with the grace of a tigress. Like the girl in Service's poem—"She knew by heart, from finish to start, the Book of Iniquity."

Zero Brant scowled. He didn't like to have Conchita in the Silver Dollar in the daytime. She was his roulette attraction, and she drew a lot of players. She didn't look so good in daylight. Men stared at her as she came up to Brant and took the glass out of his hand. Neither of them spoke. She faced the crowd and sipped from his glass.

"I have some information from El Chuchilla," she said quietly.

"What?" breathed Zero Brant.

"A man named Streak Malone came today. They say he has the nerve of the devil. They are having a meeting tonight at Buskirk's house and they are going to try and appoint Malone the marshal of Silver Butte."

"What else did El Chuchilla hear?" asked Brant.

Conchita toyed with her glass, a smile on her painted lips.

"They say," she replied, "that Streak Malone will have fifty men behind him —fifty guns."

"I'm bossin' Silver Butte," replied Brant coldly. "Fifty or five hundred—who cares? I'll handle this job."

"What about the Eureka?" asked Conchita. "They're moving in the mahogany today."

"Stay out of this," growled Zero. "This is a man's job."

"They tell me that Streak Malone is a man," she said, as she placed the empty glass on the bar, and walked away, her head high.

Zero Brant scowled. Conchita was his woman, but she was no slave. She would drop him in a minute, if the going got too tough, and he knew it. So they were going to appoint a marshal for Silver Butte, were they? Zero spat out the frayed cigar. All right! Silver Butte would find out that Zero Brant was still the boss.

He found the little Mexican Monte dealer, El Chuchilla, the Knife, and drew him aside. The Knife was a featherweight in size, but notorious for his ability in throwing a blade. He was also Zero Brant's spy. Brant said:

"Listen, you! Be at that meetin' tonight."

"*Por Dios*—no!" gasped the Mexican.

"There's goin' to be a crowd," said Brant. "You can get in. I want information of what happens."

"No," replied the Mexican stubbornly.

"Scared?" queried Brant sarcastically.

"*Si.* My friend, I know those Strick Malone, and he know me."

"Yea-a-ah? That's better. Where did you know him?"

"Medora. I am seek for broken bone t'ree month. I have leetle tro'ble een saloon. Those Malone don't tak' joke. He t'row me twenty feet t'rough a weendow."

Zero Brant grinned. "I'll send somebody else. You keep away from Streak Malone. I need yuh."

II

SILVER BUTTE came to life early in the morning. Or it may be that Silver Butte did not go to bed. The door of the sheriff's little office was open, and the sign was gone. Streak Malone was sitting on a corner of the desk, wondering why he had ever been foolish enough to listen to the pleadings of those men last night and accept the appointment as marshal of Silver Butte. The men represented what was left of law and order. There were men from the construction camps, asking for a square-deal for their men, business men, asking protection for their women and for their business. There were other men, too, watching, listening, asking nothing. Streak had said:

"Friends, I appreciate conditions in Silver Butte. No one man can do this job. I have only two eyes. Is there anyone in this room who will stand at my back—act as my deputy?"

Not a person had responded. Streak said, "I reckon it's worse than I thought. I'll find my own deputy. You gents represent the law element of Silver Butte. I want you to vote me the right to shoot first and hold trial afterwards."

The vote was unanimous.

So Streak Malone, a stranger in the town, was appointed marshal. Streak was no fool—he realized the odds. A bullet, a well-placed knife—and, as he had said, he only had two eyes. Leaning against the rough wall of the office was the sign, CLOSED BY ORDER OF THE VIGILANTES. Streak had torn it off the wall. It was his defiance to the killers who masqueraded as the law.

A man stopped in the doorway, and Streak looked up quickly. This man was of medium height, slender, long-haired, hard-faced. He, too, wore his gun. Streak knew who he was. A man had told Streak that this man was Mack Shell, leader of his own outlaw gang, reputed very fast with a gun.

They eyed each other closely, and then Shell's eyes shifted to the sign.

"Opened up again, eh?" he remarked dryly.

Streak nodded. "I'm the marshal," he said quietly.

"Yeah? What do yuh aim to do, Malone?"

"Bring law and order to Silver Butte."

Mack Shell started to laugh, but stopped and began rolling a cigarette. Streak said:

"You're Mack Shell. Are you backin' Zero Brant?"

Shell spat viciously. "Back that wolf?" he snorted.

"He claims that he's the boss of Silver Butte."

"Suits me—I don't live here."

Streak looked thoughtfully at the outlaw. "You've taken over a cattle ranch only a few miles from here, Shell," he said. "This will be your town. When you come here, do yuh want a boss?"

Shell looked coldly at Streak. "Nobody bosses Mack Shell."

"It will be you or Zero Brant some day, Shell. Good folks won't come here—folks with women and kids. There are other kinds of women, Shell, beside the kind at the Silver Dollar. A decent woman ain't safe on the street."

"She shore ain't," agreed Shell. "But that hasn't got a thing to do with me. I ain't got a woman."

"Look at it like this," suggested Streak quietly. "You had a mother—maybe a sister, Shell. They'd—"

Mack Shell flung his cigarette into the street.

"Don't preach to me!" he snapped. "I'm forgettin' things like that. I ain't backin' Zero Brant, if that helps yuh any."

"It doesn't help enough," said Streak. "You're a man with a rep, Mack Shell, and I need yore help."

"My help?" Mack Shell laughed harshly. "I don't understand that re-

mark, Malone. What do yuh mean?"

"I want you to act as my deputy."

For a moment the outlaw stared at Streak, his jaw sagging.

"You—what?" he gasped. "Deputy? Are you plumb crazy?"

"No, I'm perfectly sane."

MACK SHELL laughed again and began making another cigarette. It was a preposterous idea. Living for years, only a jump ahead of the law, and now—

"I'd be a bust as an officer," he said. "Mack Shell, deputy marshal—a lawman! What made yuh ask me, Malone?"

"I need an honest man."

"Honest man? Malone, don't you know my rep?"

Streak Malone smiled slowly. "You may be a rustler and horse-thief, Mack Shell," he said. "I don't know. A man told me that you never broke your word. I have my own code of honesty, and maybe it conflicts with the law, too. I don't care about yore rep. I want you to act as my deputy."

Mack Shell didn't smile now. He looked closely at Streak, his brow furrowed. The stage from Whitewater was coming in, ploughing through the dust, pulling up at the stage-depot, only a short distance from where Streak and Mack were standing. Two men got out of the stage, and one of them turned to assist a woman to alight. They exchanged a few words, after which the man picked up the baggage belonging to the woman. They talked for a moment with the driver, who directed them to the hotel, and they came down past the office.

One of the men was tall and swarthy, well-dressed, while the other man was short, long-armed, broad of shoulder, with the face of an ape. His head was rather round, small eyes, deep-set on either side of a broad nose, and with the widest mouth Streak and Mack had ever seen. When he laughed at some remark of his companion, one expected to see canine teeth.

The woman, slightly over-dressed and wearing a huge picture-hat, was beautiful, except that she wore too much paint and powder. The woman turned her head and looked straight at Streak as she walked past with the two men. For a moment her eyes snapped wide in amazement or horror. She stumbled into one of the men and might have fallen had not the ape-like one grasped her quickly.

Then they went on to the hotel entrance. Streak and Mack looked at each other curiously.

"That lady must have known you, Streak," Mack said.

Streak shook his head, his brow furrowed. "I never saw her before in my life, Mack. What went wrong with her? Do I look that bad? She looked scared to death."

"Kind of funny," mused Streak. "Maybe you look like the husband she ran away from."

Streak laughed and shook his head. "It beats me," he said.

"Them two men," said Mack slowly, "are pretty bad characters, Streak. The tall one is Dan Corteen, and the other one is Monk Moore. They're both killers. If you'd like to know, I'd say that the lady is in bad company."

"I've heard of both of them," said Streak. "I wonder why they came to Silver Butte."

"Watch 'em," advised Mack Shell. "You'll find out that they'll go straight to Zero Brant."

"Why would he import gunmen?"

Mack Shell laughed. "You've seen the new saloon goin' up over there. That's Jim Flack's place. A year ago Jim Flack owned the Sundance Saloon. Jim's on the square, and he ran square games. Well, one night his place burned, and Jim Flack was shot. He was laid up for weeks. In the meantime Zero Brant built the Silver Dollar over the ashes of the Sundance.

"The men will back Jim. Because he runs square games and don't doctor his whisky, all the railroad men will come to his place. Zero Brant knows this—knows that if he starts trouble with the new Eureka Saloon, the men will back Jim Flack. That's why Brant is gettin' all the gunmen he can handle. With Jim Flack's place runnin', Zero Brant will go broke—and he knows it."

Streak smiled. "I reckon I bit off quite a chew, Mack."

"Yeah, and I flung in my lot on a bit of hot trouble, too. But I knew what I was doin'. You didn't."

"You mean you'll take the job?" asked Streak quickly.

"Yeah, I reckon I've taken it, Streak. Yuh're right—some day some decent folks might want to live here—folks with good women—and kids. I'd forgotten about things like that."

STREAK started to say something, but at that moment Zero Brant stepped into the doorway which was almost too small for his huge bulk. He looked sharply at Mack Shell, but spoke to Streak.

"I'm Zero Brant," he said. "Shell knows me. I understand that you are the new marshal of Silver Butte."

"That's a fact," replied Streak.

"Not that it makes any difference, but what do you intend to do, Malone?"

Streak's jaw tightened at Brant's open sarcasm but he replied civilly, "I'm goin' to try and bring order and decency to this hell-hole of a town, Brant."

"Well!" snorted Brant. "That's a fine way to speak of Silver Butte."

"Has it ever been anything else?" queried Streak.

Zero Brant's eyes shifted to Mack Shell, who seemed just a bit amused over the exchange of words. Brant said:

"Where do you figure in this deal, Shell?"

"I'm the deputy marshal, Brant. Just appointed."

"You? Well, of all the crazy—"

"Your loop's draggin'," warned Shell coldly. "I'm the deputy, Brant, and it might be well to remember it."

"All right," said Brant. "It just seemed—sure, it's all right. Why not? I didn't come over here to quarrel over the job, but I do want to make a complaint. After all, I've got rights."

"Complaint?" asked Streak curiously.

"That's what I said—complaint. Silver Butte ain't big enough for two big saloons. Splittin' the business will hurt my place, but Jim Flack don't want a split—he wants it all. They're lyin' about my place, tryin' to turn the construction crews against me. Flack wants to boss the town—run me out of Silver Butte—even burn me out, if nothin' else works. I demand protection by the law."

"Comin' from you," said Mack Shell slowly, "that's funny."

"Don't say they can't!" snapped Brant angrily. "They burned the Sundance and shot Jim Flack. Almost killed him, too."

"We all know that, Brant," said Shell. "We also know that you was here weeks before that, tryin' to get started. When the Sundance burned, you started buildin' the Silver Dollar Saloon on that same spot, almost before the ashes were cold. Who paid to burn the Sundance has never been proved, but I heard that it was a paid job."

Brant ignored the implication that he had a hand in the burning of the Sundance. He said:

"Do I get the backin' of the law, Malone?"

"When you can show me that you deserve it—yes," replied Streak. "But the law ain't backin' crooked play, Brant."

"Are you accusin' me of runnin' crooked games?"

"I do," said Mack Shell quickly. "Malone ain't been here long enough to know what yuh do, Brant."

"I see," muttered the big gambler.

"So that's the help I'll get from the law, eh? I thought that the law meant a square-deal for everybody. As far as the Eureka and their bunch of tinhorns are concerned, I'll handle my own case. And as for you two—I don't want yore help. I'll make my own laws, and enforce 'em, too. Malone, you and yore gun-fightin' deputy can stay on this side of the street. I'll handle the other side."

Zero Brant turned and went out into the busy street. Streak laughed quietly. He said, "I wonder if he thinks we'll honor his deadline, Shell."

"He knows we won't, Streak. Brant is no fool. I'm goin' out and find my boys. I won't be goin' out to the ranch for a few days, and there's things I want done. See yuh later, Streak."

It was late in the afternoon when Streak Malone went into the Silver Dollar. The place was about half-filled at that time of day. There were several men at the long bar, and among them were Dan Corteen and Monk Moore.

Corteen was wearing a long, broadcloth coat, patent-leather boots, a wide-brimmed, black hat and the fanciest vest Streak Malone had ever seen. It was a riot of color, with flashing buttons. The tall gambler looked at Streak through narrowed eyes as Streak came in past the bar.

III

MALONE did not speak to these men because he didn't know any of them, except by name. Zero Brant was at the far end of the bar, talking with one of his gamblers, and Streak nodded to him. Then he heard Corteen saying:

"So they've got law and order here, eh?"

One of the men said, "Such as it is. They appointed a man as marshal, but one man won't do much."

"The Vigilantes killed the sheriff," remarked Corteen.

Streak stopped short and turned around. Corteen was watching him, and their eyes met.

"The sheriff was murdered, if you want the truth, sir," Streak said.

"That's not what I heard, Marshal."

"So you know who I am," remarked Streak coldly. "We're even, Corteen."

The tall gambler barely moved his lips, as he said, "I don't like the way yuh said that, my friend."

"Could it be that you're a little ashamed, Corteen?"

The gambler's face tightened perceptibly, his hands dropped to his sides. He had two holstered guns under that long coat, the butts close to the front, ready for a cross-draw. The thumbs and fingers of both hands gently touched the edges of that open coat. Then he leaned forward a little.

"This town ain't big enough for the both of us, Malone," he said harshly. "By sundown it'll be too small. We can't both stay here."

"I'll be here—watchin' it shrink, Corteen."

"I hope you have written a will," said Corteen coldly.

Streak Malone smiled slowly. "I'll make yuh a gamblin' proposition, Corteen. We'll both make out our wills, leavin' everythin' to the winner."

"What's the idea?" asked Corteen curiously.

"I'd like to inherit that vest. You probably stole it, but—"

"I what? Why, you streak-haired—"

Corteen forgot the sunset dead-line. He went for his crossed guns. Men fell away from behind him, as his hands flashed up, but Streak's draw—they didn't see it. Corteen's guns were still only waist-high, when Streak's forty-five blasted from his hip.

The tall gambler jerked back, his eyes tightly shut. His fingers relaxed and the two guns fell to the floor. Slowly his knees bent and he collapsed.

Streak had stepped back, cocked gun

still at his waist-line, his eyes searching the men in the room. Monk Moore's eyes widened a little, but there was no other sign of shock or emotion. Zero Brant had jumped away from the bar, staring at Corteen, flat on the floor.

"Well, there's one gun yuh won't have to pay for, Brant," said Mack Shell's voice, and then he continued quietly: "All right, Streak—I'm behind yuh."

"Thank yuh, Shell."

Brant didn't speak, no matter what he thought. He had seen the deadly efficiency of the new marshal of Silver Butte.

One of the men said flatly, "Corteen reached first." That remark settled any argument as to the aggressor.

Shell said, "Brant, you brought him here—you take care of him."

Streak turned and walked out, but Mack Shell didn't have the same confidence in that gang; he backed out. They met outside and walked over to the office.

As they stopped in front of the office to look back at the Silver Dollar, Mack Shell said, "You spoke a language they understand, Streak. Dan Corteen was fast with a gun but you beat him. Ten minutes ago you was known as the fool who took a dangerous job. Now yuh're Streak Malone, marshal of Silver Butte, who wouldn't wait for sunset."

"I'm sorry," said Streak. "I don't want to kill anybody but he was out to kill me."

"I heard it all," declared Mack Shell. "I was right behind yuh. Dan Corteen started it, thinkin' you'd crawl—and yuh didn't. Forget Dan Corteen. He's had it comin' a long time, Streak."

"I guess you're right, Mack."

"I know this kind of a deal. Corteen was here to get you. The next one won't give yuh a break—yuh're dangerous. I got a good look at the expression on Zero Brant's face, and the sand was spillin' out of his craw. You killed his pet monkey and he don't like it."

IT WAS nearly dark that evening, when Streak Malone ran face to face with the woman who got off the stage that day. She was just leaving the hotel entrance. She stopped short, staring at Streak.

"Who are you?" she asked throatily. Streak smiled slowly.

"I am Streak Malone, marshal of Silver Butte, ma'am."

"Streak Malone?" She shook her head and repeated it again, under her breath.

Streak said, "Ma'am, I'd advise against yuh goin' out on the street alone."

She smiled thinly and said, "I expect to deal faro at the new Eureka and I must see a Mr. Flack."

"No matter what yuh do for a livin', this street ain't safe," Malone declared. "I'll take yuh over there, if I may."

"Thank you, Mr. Malone."

They reached the other side of the street and stopped in front of the Eureka. Streak noticed that she still seemed to look at him in amazement, tinged with disbelief.

"Be careful, ma'am," he said. "Jim Flack is all right, but conditions in this town are very bad."

"Thank you, but I shall do very nicely, I'm sure. By the way, I believe you had a little trouble with Dan Corteen today."

"You knew him?"

"Oh, no, I merely met him on the stage. Thank you for bringing me over here."

"You are very welcome, ma'am."

"I am Clare Ames," she said simply. "Names don't usually mean much out here."

Streak laughed. "Yuh mean—you change 'em often?"

"Not too often. For instance, you were probably not christened Streak Malone—or even Malone."

Streak smiled slowly. "A child has little chance to select a name," he said. "Parents very often give children names

that they detest later on in life, so they can't blame us for takin' one that we like better."

"Or one that is safer."

Streak looked at her curiously. "Yes," he said, "I believe that is true, Miss Ames. Good luck to you and your new job."

"Thank you, Mr. Malone."

Streak walked to the edge of the rough sidewalk, his eyes very thoughtful. Why did that woman say, "You were probably not christened Malone," he wondered. Why did she look at him, wide-eyed? He had never seen her before she came to Silver Butte.

There always was a lot of activity in Silver Butte at night. Construction men, off shift, thronged the street, many of them intoxicated. Fights started and ended without interference. The jail was too small to think of starting a crusade against mere personal fights. Tomorrow night the new Eureka would open, which would, no doubt, start trouble. Streak Malone realized the enormity of his job. He had won his first encounter, but he knew, as Mack Shell had said, they would not give him a break next time.

He managed to cross the street to his office where he found Mack Shell, carefully oiling his six-shooter. The little outlaw smiled slowly, and Streak knew that he had seen him taking Clare Ames across the street.

"She's dealin' at the Eureka tomorrow night," Streak said.

"So Jim Flack is goin' to use female bait, too, eh?" remarked Shell. "Yuh know, I'm afraid that Brant is goin' to have plenty competition, Streak. That little singer—the one they call Mazie over at the Silver Dollar—has quit Brant and will sing at the Eureka. The men are crazy about her singin'."

"Have you got a puncher in yore outfit, sort of a kid, named Joe?" asked Streak.

"Yeah. Joe East."

"I heard him talkin' with that singer. He wants her to marry him and go back East."

"He does, eh? Yuh know, one of my boys told me that Joe was shinin' around her but I didn't believe it. Joe's just a kid. He ain't one of my regular gang, Streak. He just works with cows."

"What did yore boys say, when yuh told 'em you was a law-man?"

THE outlaw hesitated, then shoved back his sombrero and scratched his head.

"Thought I'd gone crazy," Mack Shell grinned. "But I explained the whole thing, and they're behind us. If yuh don't mind, Streak, I'll sleep here in the office tonight. There might be bushwhackers along the road to my ranch and, anyway, somebody might try to put up that sign again on the door of the office."

Streak was in no mood to go to bed and yet he realized the danger of that main street at night. Men were still working at the Eureka when he went over there, polishing the long bar, putting the final touches on the gambling paraphernalia. It cost Jim Flack a pretty penny to have all that shipped to Silver Butte.

He found Flack, a tall, saturnine gambler, watching the men. His greeting to Streak was very friendly. He said: "Glad you came over Malone. I heard about that trouble in the Silver Dollar, and the folks are showing a lot of confidence in you as marshal of Silver Butte."

"Thank you," said Streak soberly. "You've spent a lot of money to build and operate this place. That bar must have cost a small fortune, alone."

"I want to make this place permanent, Malone, but I'm afraid it might not work out that way. You know something of the conditions, and they are not good. I want to operate honest games and sell good liquors, but I don't know."

"I know what yuh mean, Flack—and they're not good prospects."

"A man told me," remarked Flack grimly, "that I'd be serving drinks off a pine table after the opening—if I lived. I don't like things like that, Malone."

Streak looked around the big room. Everything was of the best. He admired the long ornate back-bar, the mirror gleaming in the lamplight, reflecting back the glitter of expensive glass-ware.

In size, it was smaller than the Silver Dollar, but there was no comparison as to appointments.

"You've been quite a while in buildin' this place, Flack," Streak said. "It took a lot of time and money to get it furnished. Has anybody interfered in any way in the buildin' or haulin' in of all the furniture?"

"Not a soul," replied the gambler. "I've thought of that. It would have been easy to smash the furniture on those wagons, to tear down what I've built. Why did they let me do all this if they objected to me operating here?"

"Maybe it's all talk," suggested Streak.

"I hope it is. I don't want trouble."

Flack walked over to the group of workmen, paid them off in cash and came back to Streak. They were alone in the Eureka now.

Flack said, "I've tried, but haven't been able to find a man to act as watchman. Malone, I believe they are afraid to take the job."

He took Streak to the back of the place and showed him the little office. Off the office was a small room, furnished, with a single-bed, rough table and a chair.

Streak said, "Are you goin' to sleep here?"

Flack shook his head. "No," he said. "I have a room at the hotel. The watchman can use the bed during the day."

"Do yuh mind if I sleep here tonight?" asked Streak.

Flack looked curiously at Streak, but nodded. "I'd be mighty glad if yuh would," he said. "If you want to leave, that front door is on a snap-lock. It will lock behind you."

After a few moments Flack told him good night and went out. Streak kicked off his high-heel boots, and stretched out on the new blankets, smoking a cigarette, trying to figure out just what to do in order to change conditions in Silver Butte. He had finished his cigarette, but not his ideas, when he heard men walking the length of the saloon, their boots sounding hollow in the room. The office door was opened, men came in and closed the door, and he heard them light the lamp.

THE partition between the two rooms was thin, and he could hear everything that was said. There was a small window in the little bedroom, but the only door opened into the office. The men in the office were silent for several moments, then one said:

"All right, Flack. You know why we brought yuh here, of course."

"Sorry," replied Jim Flack coldly, "but I do not. When masked men force me at the point of a gun to open doors and go with them, I believe they should do the explaining."

One man laughed harshly. "You ain't that ignorant, Flack. Here is a bill-of-sale, and we want yuh to sign it. Go ahead and read it—we can wait that long. Nobody knows yuh're here, so take all the time yuh want."

Noise from the outside drifted into the place, but there was no sound from the other room, until Flack's voice said:

"Sorry, but I won't sign this, gentlemen."

"Yuh won't, eh? Listen, Flack—you sign it—or die here."

"And if I do sign it, I also die, eh?"

"Oh, shore. But not here. You'll just disappear."

"I don't get the idea of this bill-of-sale."

"Still ignorant, eh? You fool! Why do yuh reckon we let yuh go ahead and build this place, and furnish it? We could have stopped yuh any time we wanted to, but we figured that we'd let you pay all the bills, get everythin' all ready, and then we'd take it over. See the idea, Flack. The bill-of-sale is to Buck Smith? Names don't mean anythin', my friend. Go ahead and sign it."

"No!" snapped Flack. "If you intend killing me, why should I sign it? That would legalize the transfer. Go ahead."

IV

AT THAT moment Streak Malone flung the door open. That is, he would have flung it open, but something caught under the door, blocking it half-open.

A man ripped out a curse, and a bullet smashed into the door. At the same moment the other man crashed the lamp, throwing the place into darkness. Streak managed to force his way past the partly-opened door, clawed for the doorway into the saloon. He heard the men racing down the saloon to the door, but he was not able to orient himself enough to shoot in the dark. Then the front door banged shut, and the men were gone.

Streak said, "Are yuh all right, Flack?"

"Yes, I am all right, thanks to you, Malone. That was a close call. Let's get the lamp from the bedroom."

The windows were covered, the door shut, when Streak lighted the lamp, and they looked at each other.

Flack said, "You came just in time, Malone. He was pulling the trigger."

"Glad I did." Streak smiled. "But I'm sorry the door stuck. Do yuh know either of them fellers, Flack?"

Flack shook his head. "They were both masked," he said.

"Do yuh know Buck Smith?"

"Oh, you mean the name on that bill-of-sale? No, I don't. It was only a name. But we know why they let me go ahead with this place. Well, they've ruined their first attempt, Malone, thanks to you. I'll go out the back way and get to the hotel. I don't believe they'll make another attempt tonight."

They went into the dark office and Jim Flack opened the back door.

"I don't know how to thank you, Malone," he said. "Maybe I can make it up to you—some way."

"Forget that part of it," said Streak. "Good luck."

Streak went back to the bedroom and examined the bullethole in the door. That bullet hadn't missed him by more than a scant few inches. In fact, it had blown splinters onto the blanket. He stretched out again, trying to figure out more angles, but went to sleep quickly.

Jim Flack was over there next morning, before Streak awoke, and they talked things over. Flack said that he had talked with the superintendent of the hard-rock men on the railroad, and that the man was worried. Some of the more intelligent laborers realized that Zero Brant's brace-games were keeping the men broke, and the bad liquor had made several of them unable to work at all. He said that any incident might start serious trouble.

"It's a bad situation," agreed Streak. "But what can be done about it, Flack? You can't make arrests on what people think. Zero Brant has a tough following, and as far as enforcing the law is concerned, who or what is the law? I could put a man in jail, but how could he ever be convicted? What jury could, or would, decide guilt or innocence? Flack, this is a case where Old Man Colt is the only judge and jury."

"I realize that, Malone," nodded Flack. "I realize more than ever now that there will be trouble. Those men, last night, trying to force me to sign this place over to them, proved to me

that they will stop at nothing."

Streak found Mack Shell on the street and told him what happened at the Eureka. The little outlaw grinned slowly.

"So that's why they let Flack go ahead with everythin'," he remarked. "If you hadn't been there, Flack would be dead now. Zero Brant is behind all this, Streak."

Streak nodded. "But we can't prove it," he said.

The opening of the Eureka was not auspicious. Zero Brant was furnishing free whisky at the Silver Dollar and the house was packed with half-drunk humanity, mostly foreigners. A half-dozen bartenders were working at top speed but the games were not being patronized too well. A three-piece orchestra could hardly be heard above the roar of the crowd.

BRANT was watching the crowd, a scowl on his face. The free whisky was keeping the crowd away from the games. Streak stood back against the wall, watching Brant. It was the first time Streak had ever seen Zero Brant without a hat, and he noticed that Brant's forehead was criss-crossed with scars which were not too visible under a low-pulled hat-brim.

Chap-clad cowboys, wild as hawks, rubbed elbows with perspiring, muck-stained laborers, who gulped free whisky and roared songs in strange tongues. Here and there in the crowd were men in buckskin, bearded, long-haired, buffalo-hunters and trappers. The buffalo hunters furnished meat for the railroad crews.

At one end of the room El Chuchilla, the Knife, presided over a Three-Card-Monte game. This layout was not popular with the rank and file of patrons, but it placed the knife-throwing half-breed in a good position to overlook the room, and flash signals to Zero Brant.

Mack Shell worked his way through the crowd and came in beside Streak. He said, "There's a storm comin', Streak."

Streak nodded. "It's bound to."

"I mean outside," said Shell. "Wind blowing, and yuh can hear the thunder. Yuh can't hardly see through the dust right now."

Streak nodded, watching Conchita at the roulette wheel. She was blazing with jewels, but the wheel was stopped. Shell laughed.

"Free whisky and no gamblers," he said. "Serves him right."

Conchita was looking at them now, and Streak noticed that her eyes were almond-shaped and almost green.

Mack Shell said, "Some day she'll kill Brant. There's a rattler down along the Mexican Border, with green eyes—like hers—and they don't always rattle before they strike."

One of Mack Shell's cowboys forced his way through the crowd and came in beside them. He said, "If you think Conchita is pretty, take a look at the gal in the Eureka. She's got this'n beat four ways from the jack. And she's runnin' an honest wheel. I won forty dollars on one whirl."

The cowboy went on, circulating through the crowd, telling them about the Eureka. Streak smiled. Flack had probably hired several cowboys to pass out the good news, and the patrons were already drifting outside.

"Let's go over to the Eureka," suggested Shell.

"These men won't leave free whisky," said Streak.

"The free whisky is over." Shell laughed. "They've just put up the sign."

Slowly the crowd was drifting out of the place, some of them barely able to walk. Streak and Shell went outside. Lights were blotted out in the swirl of dust, and flashes of lightning were frequent now. Just as they found the entrance to the Eureka, a crash of thunder brought the first splatter of rain.

The new saloon was filling fast as they came in. The polished furniture reflected the lamplight, a thing of beauty in that rough, wild country, but the patrons were not interested in that sort of beauty.

Jim Flack, backed against the bar, was watching the gathering crowd, many of whom crowed around the roulette, where Clare Ames was running the layout. Mack Shell circulated among the crowd but Streak stayed near the end of the bar, out of the crowd. Men shoved through the open doorway, most of them drenched with rain.

The building shuddered under the concussion of thunder.

More men shoved in around the roulette, singing, cursing. It was a terrible place for a woman—even for the wrong kind. Flack came slowly over to Streak, tense, hard-eyed.

"I don't like it, Malone," he said. "They tell me that Zero Brant dished out free whisky to this mob. They're all drunk."

Streak nodded, his face grim. "Even free whisky wouldn't hold 'em, Flack. They're like a pack of wolves."

MORE men surged in, possibly twenty or thirty huge foreigners, singing some sort of a chant. The room filled to suffocation, humming like a giant bee-hive, rank with the smell of unwashed humanity, liquor and strong tobacco smoke.

Somebody deep in the crowd cursed in a foreign tongue, screaming his words against the thud of a pistol shot. Came a babel of oaths, two more pistol shots, and pandemonium broke loose. Men surged toward the disturbance, and Streak caught sight of upraised bottles as the wave of men crushed tables and chairs, trampling drunken men to the floor, yelling like animals.

Suddenly they seemed to split into two factions, fighting each other. Streak knew what this meant. This drunken horde was bent on destroying everything in the Eureka.

Streak backed in against the end of the bar, gun in hand. He lost sight of Jim Flack. Out of the packed mob, like a football player packing the ball, came a huge, bearded giant, carrying a man in his arms. It was one of Mack Shell's men. He dropped the unconscious cowboy and drew back a foot to kick him in the head when a shot crashed out, and the kick was not delivered. The big man went down, and the crowd trampled over him. Mack Shell was there, smoking gun in hand, dragging his cowboy away. Streak tried to help him, but a man crashed into him, and he went spinning against the wall at the end of the bar.

Streak went to his knees but came up quickly. Bottles were whizzing across the room, smashing the lamps, and the smoke-chopped room became a blurred mass of fighting men. Windows were smashed, letting in the wind and storm, and while men battled in the Eureka, nature battled outside, the claps of thunder shaking the building.

Streak fought his way across the room, forcing his way by swinging his six-shooter over-hand, climbing over men, trying to reach the smashed roulette layout. It was like a nightmare, where everything went wrong. Men screamed curses in his face, but he drove them aside and kept on going, while that crazy mob destroyed everything in the place.

He found Clare Ames, pinned under the wreckage of the wheel, unable to escape or protect herself. She was too dazed to know what was going on, when Streak picked her up in his arms. She tried weakly to strike him, but her strength was gone. A man crashed into him and tried to take her away, but he shouldered the man back into the mob.

Streak clawed his way along the wall to a broken window where he shoved her through. Then he crawled after her

into the downpour. From inside the saloon came a warning scream, and he looked back. The smashed lamps had started a fire. Someone threw a smashed keg of whisky into the flames and a moment later the place was an inferno.

V

FINALLY Streak reached the office with the girl. He didn't dare to light a lamp but the blazing saloon gave plenty illumination. Clare Ames was recovered now. She wiped some blood off her face and looked closely at Streak.

She said, "What is your name?"

"I'm Streak Malone," he replied.

"You are Keith Delmar," she said. "No man could look as much like Jim Delmar and not be his brother."

Streak Malone hunched forward, staring at her in the light of the flickering flames. Keith Delmar! No man in the West knew that he was Keith Delmar—and this woman came out of nowhere to tell him.

"Jim's wife?" he whispered. "How on earth—"

"You look like Jim," she said. "I know the whole story—know that you escaped from a court room, before the jury came back. You should have waited—the jury disagreed. Jim got new evidence. A gambler, who was a friend of your step-father, pawned some of the jewelry you was accused of stealing. It was traced to him, but he was gone. He killed your step-father—not you, Keith Delmar. The law knows it."

"For heaven's sake, keep talkin'!" gasped Streak. "I never knew what happened, after I leaped from that window in St. Louis, ten years ago. Where is Jim?"

"That gambler killed him in Medora two years ago," she whispered. "Jim lived long enough to tell me—it was the same man. In St. Louis he was Tom Hall, but I don't know what name he had in Medora. Jim made him confess to the murder but, in some way, he managed to shoot Jim. Jim told me who shot him, but he never gave me the name."

Clare hesitated, choked, but managed to say, "Jim said to look for the man with the Mark of Cain."

"Mark of Cain?" whispered Streak Malone. "Yuh mean—well, what does it mean—this Mark of Cain?"

"An M, branded on his forehead," said Clare. "It's the only solution I've ever heard. I've kept going, trying to find that man, but I can't find him."

The door banged open and Mack Shell limped in. He saw them and blurted, "Thank God, you're both alive! Streak, I've got our two horses out behind the jail. The devil is dancin' tonight in Silver Butte, and the fiddler ain't been paid yet. There's a lot of people who never got out of the Eureka—drunken workmen, a cowboy or two—that little Mazie, the singer. Somebody said she died in there. That buildin' next to the Eureka is gone, too. Only the wind and rain can save the rest of that side of the street."

Streak Malone said, "You stay here, Clare. Bar that door and don't open it. There's more work to be done. C'mon, Mack."

They went out into the rain and they heard Clare drop the heavy bar into the slots. A man came running, saw them and came back.

He said, "I recognize you now. I'm the superintendent of construction and I want to tell you that the men have gone crazy. A lot of them burned in that building, and they blame Brant. They say he had men start the trouble in the Eureka."

"What are they going to do?" asked Streak anxiously.

"They've got dynamite. It's the one weapon they understand. I can't stop them for they're seeking revenge. Do what you can, but don't take too many chances, because they're a crazy, drunken mob of men, who will stop at nothing."

"We've got to stop 'em!" exclaimed Shell. "I'll see what I can do. Maybe the buffalo hunters can help us. I'll try."

Mack Shell went limping away in the rain. Streak tried to think of some way to halt the mob, but his mind kept hammering:

"You're free again, free again, free again! You're not Streak Malone—you're Keith Delmar. The law knows you didn't kill your step-father. You're free again!"

Streak drew a deep breath and went across the street. Smoke still billowed up from the heaps of hot ashes as the rain hissed down. Streak was hatless, bleeding from several cuts on his face.

HE STOPPED in front of the Silver Dollar. A crowd had gathered in there, but they were not drinking or gambling. Streak shoved his way through the crowd. There was Zero Brant, Conchita, El Chuchilla, Monk Moore and others. Between them and the crowd was Joe East, the young cowboy from Shell's ranch. Joe had no gun, and he had very few clothes. Dirty, torn, bleeding, he stood there accusing Zero Brant, who hunched forward, his evil, little eyes watching Joe East. As Streak shoved forward, he heard Joe say hoarsely:

"You sent one of yore men into the Eureka to start that fight, Brant, you dirty murderer, and they're comin' to get yuh. If I had a gun, I'd shoot out yore black heart myself."

Brant, still hunched, his huge hands opening and closing, came slowly toward Joe East. It was like a gorilla attacking a pigmy. Joe didn't move. He seemed incapable of movement. But before Brant could reach him, Streak Malone stepped out from the crowd and walked between them. Zero Brant stopped as he considered this new enemy, and his eyes blinked. A sudden rage seemed to strike him. His brow furrowed, bringing his brows down over his eyes. There was some sort of a commotion behind Streak, and he heard Clare's voice scream:

"The Mark of Cain!"

Streak leaned forward, staring at Brant, who had lifted his head. Those scars on his forehead, when pulled down in that bestial scowl made a perfect letter M in the middle of his sloping forehead.

It was then that Brant dived at Streak, trying to clutch him in his powerful hands. But Streak was watching and sidestepped quickly, bumping into a man to his left, and Brant almost went into the crowd. Streak suddenly realized his danger and reached for his gun, but the man he had pumped into had taken it.

Brant had swung around, aimed a powerful smash at Streak's head, which he barely avoided. Then he smashed Brant full in the face with a right hand that would have knocked most men down, but it only drove Brant's head back momentarily. Brant was cut and bleeding now.

Men jostled Streak from behind, and he realized that the odds were heavily against him. Then Zero Brant came with a bull-like rush, driving Streak against the crowd, but Streak managed to uppercut him with rights and lefts, sending him off balance. A man threw a shoulder into Streak's back, sending him stumbling ahead, but he recovered and faced Brant again.

Something whizzed past his ear, and he heard a man cry out with pain. El Chuchilla had missed his target and pinned the wrong man. Someone tripped Streak, and at that moment Zero Brant caught one of Streak's arms in a vise-like grip. Brant was bleeding from a badly-cut eye, nose and mouth, and he didn't seem to know what to do, now that he had caught Streak.

"The wishbone, Streak!" yelled Mack Shell's voice. "Hit him in the wishbone!"

Streak's right hand was free, and he

smashed Brant's nose flat. Again and again he smashed that nose, until Brant released the hold on Streak's left arm, trying to protect himself. Streak drew a deep breath. Brant had flung both hands up, trying to protect his face, when Streak, putting every ounce of power into a right hand blow, drove it deep into Brant's body, just below the arch of his huge ribs.

Zero Brant's mouth snapped wide and he grunted with pain. His stomach was not fortified against such a punch. He sagged, both hands dropping to his sides, and Streak hit him again in the same spot. But Brant merely grunted.

With the agility of a monkey, El Chuchilla had reached the top of the bar, knife in hand, but a pistol cracked, and the little knife-artist was fairly lifted off the bar by the heavy bullet.

"Get out of here!" a man yelled. "They're goin' to dynamite yuh!"

Streak whirled, but at that moment something hit him, and he went reeling against the wall. It was several minutes, before Streak could realize what had happened. Clare was trying to help him up, and the place was deserted, except for El Chuchilla, behind the bar, and a man sitting against the wall, looking wearily at life. He was the one El Chuchilla had hit.

STREAK managed to get to his feet on rubbery legs. Gradually the building stopped whirling, and he could recognize her.

"I'm all right," he whispered. "Why did you follow me?"

"I had to come," she said. "I couldn't stay in the office. You saw the Mark of Cain on Zero Brant?"

Streak nodded wearily. "Let's get out," he said. "We've got to help—somebody."

They went outside. There was a crowd further down the street, yelling and cursing.

Streak said, "I forgot the dynamiters. Clare. You go to the office and wait for me." He went at a staggering run down the middle of the street.

"Don't let Brant get away!" he heard someone yell.

A man was running up the street, and Streak called to him. It was Mack Shell, going back to find Streak, panting, swearing.

"They knocked me down and rolled me plumb into the street!" Shell panted. "Brant and his woman got away somewhere."

"The dynamiters?" queried Streak anxiously.

"They ain't got here yet. We've got to find Zero Brant!"

They reached the office and stopped. A revolver exploded somewhere behind the jail, followed by a yell. Shell exclaimed, "The horses!"

Streak had forgotten that Shell had saddled their horses. They hurried down the narrow alley. It was quite dark down there.

Streak heard a voice saying huskily, "I came to get you, Brant. You killed her, so I'll kill you."

A six-shooter flamed so close to a man that the sparks splattered off like water from a hose. A moment later a man was flung almost into them. It was Joe East, but they didn't know it. A horse snorted and they heard Zero Brant's voice:

"Whoa, you devil!"

The fence suddenly splintered, and a horse lunged almost into Streak and Shell. It was Ghost, with Zero Brant on his back. The big gambler had neglected to untie the rope, and the big outlaw was dragging nearly a panel of the fence with him as they went out through the alley. Streak and Mack Shell ran in behind them, and saw Ghost whirl in the middle of the street, that section of fence acting like a scythe.

A crowd of men were coming up the street, yelling, swearing.

"The dynamiters, Streak!" said Mack Shell.

They were almost to the spot, where Ghost had plunged with his swaying rider. With a scream of rage the big gray horse bucked straight into that crowd, the roped fence cutting a swath. They broke for cover and the big gray broke loose from the fence, going into a real bucking frenzy. They saw Zero Brant crash into the street, and the gray whirled, looking for more worlds to conquer.

Streak and Mack Shell were the first to reach Zero Brant. The crowd had been scattered, but they began coming back. The men had the dynamite and right now they didn't seem to remember just what they had intended doing with it. Streak told them, "The man you wanted is dead—here. Pick him up and carry him to the Silver Dollar."

One huge man said stubbornly, "I no carry him—he kill my brother."

"He killed mine, too," said Streak, and without any further word, several of them picked up Brant.

They trooped up to the Silver Dollar. Jim Flack was there, and so was Joe East. Jim Flack looked like he had been sent through a threshing machine, and Joe East looked worse, but Joe didn't mind. He had his arms around Mazie, and Mazie was smiling.

Jim Flack said, "The kid thought Mazie was dead—in the fire—but I threw her through a window. I guess she must have struck on her head, because she's been wandering around in the dark. She's all right now."

Clare Ames had followed the crowd over there, and she went to Mazie. Streak looked around and saw Jim Buskirk. The merchant was carrying a buffalo gun, and he looked as though he had been burrowing in a coal-pile.

"I think this town will be all right now," Buskirk said. "Zero Brant can't run it any longer. I guess the rest of his gang got away, but that's all right. I believe we'll agree that Jim Flack is entitled to the Silver Dollar—since Brant was to blame for wiping out the Eureka. Is that all right with you, Malone?"

"I'm satisfied," replied Streak wearily. "Buskirk, can you and yore wife take in Miss Ames and Mazie for a day or two?"

"You bet we can! I'll take 'em right down there."

"You walk ahead and blaze the trail. I'll take her myself."

Buskirk grinned through his grime, as he said, "What about Mazie?"

"She'll get there," said Joe East huskily, "but she may have to drag me."

Mack Shell drew a deep breath, wiped a grimy hand across his face and said:

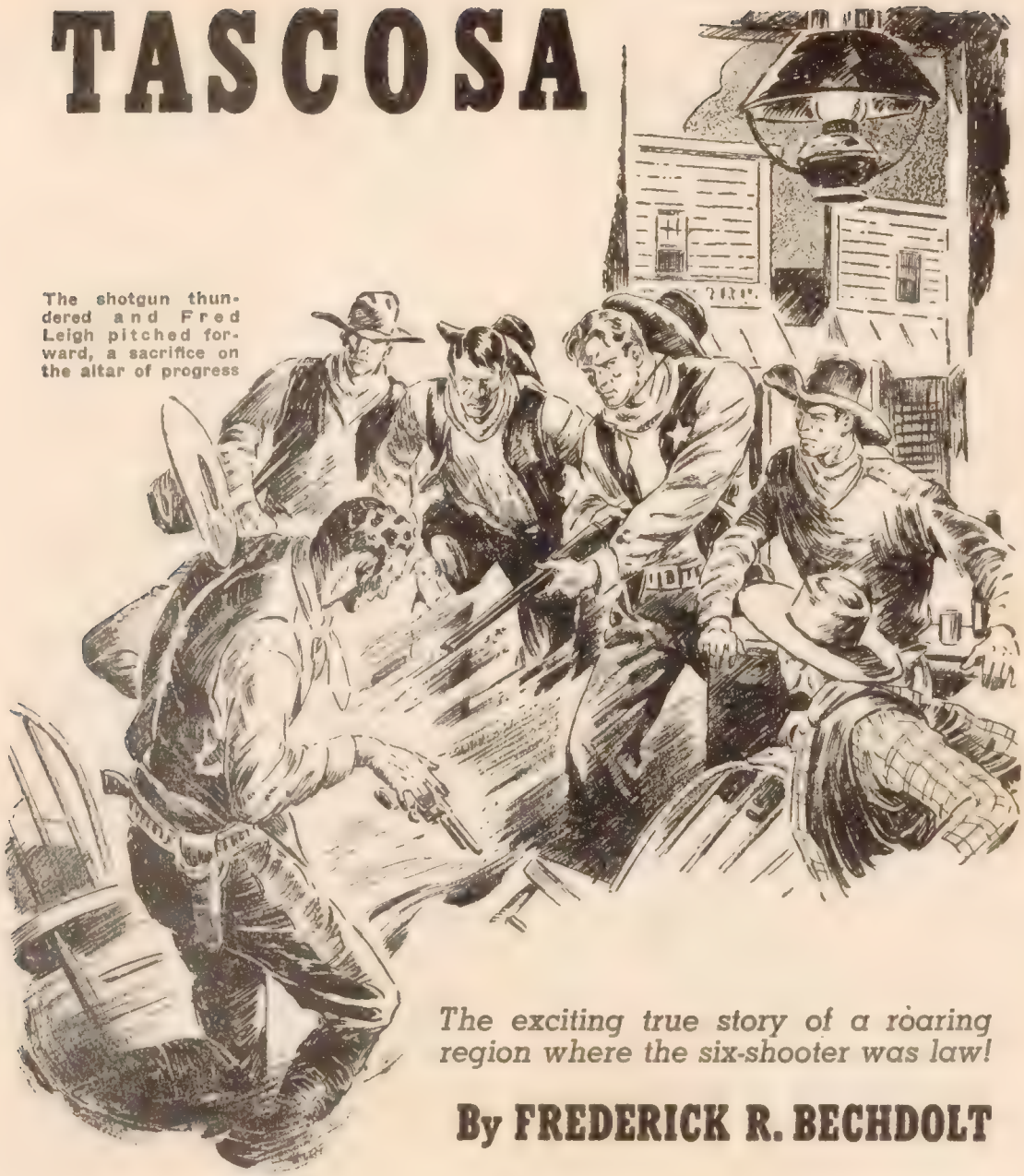
"I reckon everythin' is all right, folks. The marshal has done taken over for himself."

Aces and Eights

A POKER playing cowboy who finds himself with two pair, aces and eights, in his hand, is often apt to shudder with superstitious chills. For throughout the West, aces and eights are known as the "dead man's hand."

The superstition dates back to the murder of Wild Bill Hickok by the disreputable Jack McCall. Hickok was playing poker in a saloon in Deadwood. For once he had overlooked caution and sat with his back to a door. The drunken McCall came into the saloon behind him and shot him in the back. When the cards were removed from Wild Bill's fingers, he was found to be holding two pair—aces and eights. Since then it has been known as the "dead man's hand."—JOHN BLACK.

TASCOSA



The shotgun thundered and Fred Leigh pitched forward, a sacrifice on the altar of progress

The exciting true story of a roaring region where the six-shooter was law!

By FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

IN THE good old days before the coming of the long-horned cattle and the bold-eyed cowboys, before the buffalo-hunters invaded the Llano Estacado, and Kiowas claimed the Texas Panhandle as their hunting-grounds—in those days Tascosa was born.

It was not then a town nor yet a camp but a mere rendezvous on the north bank of the Canadian. Hither Mexican traders from old Taos drove their pack-mules laden with the potent wheat whisky for which their town was famous. This last they hid carefully at some distance from their camp and bided the arrival of the Indians.

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Now the savages drifted in across the Staked Plains, Comanches and Kiowas for the most part, with now and then a group of rugged Cheyennes or a handful of venomous-eyed Apaches, bringing their loot of ponies and sore-footed cattle from the settlements beyond the Llano. They pitched their tepees, and the bartering began.

It was so many yards of calico for a sound young horse and so much gunpowder for a cow. During this preliminary proceeding the whisky was mentioned, and its fiery virtues described. It became a bait, the more alluring because of its absence.

Members of that trading-party had no fancy to let their scalps hang from Comanche lodge-poles. They did their trafficking without any dangerous refreshments and, when the last animal had been bargained for, the new owners departed with the herds, leaving a man or two behind them.

These delegates, who were always seasoned old hands at the business, waited for three days to give the cattle a good start. Then they took the Indians to the cache where the liquor had been hidden, and rode away as fast as their horses could carry them. For the wheat whisky of Taos was famous for its potency, and the red brothers were equally famous for the swiftness with which they forgot their manners, once they took a drink.

In this way Tascosa became a landmark in the wide lands of the free grass.

In 1876 the white buffalo-hunters crossed the Arkansas and pressed on southward, invading this land which the Indians had called their own. The red men retired to the Indian Territory, and the rugged hide-hunters set to work exterminating the last bison herds.

BY 1878 the cow-men were coming in, and they made the place their roundup headquarters. There was now a postoffice, and those who established it christened it Atascosa, which means boggy ford, but the department refused to allow the name because of Atascosa County in southern Texas, and they solved the problem by dropping the initial A.

During this halcyon period every man made his own rules of conduct and enforced them if he was able to do so. A killing was the end of complications then, instead of the beginning, as is now the case. But shooting-scrapes were as yet infrequent, though there was much powder burned in joyous celebration. The men of the Canadian were for the most part dead shots and every one realized that he who reached for his gun in anger must be prepared to see the thing right through. But in the winter of 1880-81 there came a change.

It was on a June morning in 1881 that a number of cowboys rode in to Tascosa to spend their wages. Among them were Jim East and Charley Siringo, who had spent the winter over in New Mexico hunting down Billy the Kid's band of outlaws, Tom Monroe and Charley Coffee, whose outfit had been working away down to the southward, and young Fred Leigh, a new hand on the L X.

The members of this quintet hung pretty closely together. Like men who greet an old friend after long absence by slapping him on the back, they were renewing acquaintance with the place. But Time has a faculty of bringing developments of character which do not show upon the surface, as more than one, who claps a former boon companion between the shoulders, has learned.

Joyously, the five drifted from one establishment to another. Noontime found them in Jack Ryan's new saloon indulging in the good old pastime of shooting at one another's hats. Their big single-action revolvers shook the walls with their bellowing. Then the personification of the new conditions with which they had not reckoned ap-

peared in the doorway.

"Hello!" one cried. "Here's Cape Willingham." When they saw the bit of polished nickel which he was wearing on his vest, their eyes widened with surprise.

"How's this?" they demanded. "Sheriff!"

"Sheriff," he told them. "This here's Oldham County now, boys. We done organized last winter. It's against the law to shoot up the town, and I'll have to take you fellows to Marion Armstrong. He's justice of the peace."

The sheriff led them to the cabin where the newly appointed justice held court.

"What's the damages, judge?" they demanded.

Marion Armstrong did not know the taste of whisky, but there were certain factors in this case to mitigate any natural intolerance that he might feel.

"I'll let you-all off with five dollars apiece and costs," he announced finally.

They paid their fines and departed swiftly. Young Fred Leigh then took occasion to denounce the new conditions. He was, he said, about to leave Tascosa where such things as this had come to pass. Within a few minutes he made good his word and rode away to his outfit, which was encamped a few miles out of town. With him he took a bottle or two to bear him company.

He was young and, moreover, one of those luckless ones whom whisky makes belligerent. During the ride the incident grew and grew until it became a deep grievance. So he came back to town again a few hours later, determined to defy the sheriff, the long-nosed justice of the peace, and the statutes of the sovereign State of Texas. He came shooting, and his eye fell on some ducks belonging to Mrs. Turner, a resident of Tascosa.

The ducks were targets to set the trigger-finger of a drunken man to itching, and he managed to slay two.

THE quartet in Jack Ryan's saloon heard the shots, and they were ready for him when he leaped from his horse to join them.

"Get his gun before Cape Willingham comes along," they told one another. They gathered round him but drink had made him suspicious, and he eluded them. In the midst of the scuffle news came that the sheriff was on his way down the street with his double-barreled shotgun.

Next, the sheriff's form loomed in the doorway, and they fell back from the luckless puncher as his hand swept toward his forty-five.

"Hands up!" Cape Willingham had barely time to speak the formula made and provided by custom for such cases, before the revolver was drawn. The shotgun roared, and Fred Leigh pitched forward, a sacrifice on the altar of progress.

Law had come to Tascosa.

There is no doubt that if Cape Willingham had been like some peace-officers who carved larger niches in the Old West's Hall of Fame, he would have burned a good deal of powder, provided he had lasted long enough. But he understood his people and did not try to crowd things.

In the beginning came the problem of dealing with the lithe young riders whose visits brought a large share of Tascosa's prosperity. That the tragic incident in Jack Ryan's saloon was not followed by many others was due in part to the sheriff's hard sense and in part to the topography of the county seat.

By a process of natural gravitation, which seems to take place in every new camp, the stores and the more sedate saloons hung to the summit of the first bench-land while the dance-halls lay clustered beneath the hill. To those buoyant spirits who must turn loose their big-caliber revolvers while they were getting rid of their wages, the word went out: shoot as much as you

please in Hogtown, but when you reach the top of the grade keep your weapons in the holsters.

By the time Willingham's term came to an end, conditions were changing in the Panhandle. New outfits were establishing themselves along the Canadian, the range was growing more crowded, Eastern and British capital was coming into the country, and the era of the absent owners was beginning. The good old days when every cowboy was blindly loyal to his employer, were nearing their end.

With the dawning of this period came uneasiness. There were mutterings of dissatisfaction out on the Llano, rumors of systematic rustling.

Such times demand wise rulers, and although there were the courts, the sheriff was the active administrator of justice. On his personality depended the peace of the community. So, when election drew near, the men of Oldham County looked about them for one who could keep his head amid the bickerings of factions. They picked Jim East.

With the years he had developed. A prestige which had followed him from old gun-fighting times down on the border had grown the brighter when he had helped to capture Billy the Kid over on the Pecos in the spring of '81.

Since his return to Tascosa on that June day when young Fred Leigh died with his boots on, he had steadied down, as the old saying has it. Materially he had prospered to the point where he now owned the Equity Saloon in partnership with Frank James, which means that he was a solid and respected citizen. Moreover, he was married now, a householder.

So he was sworn into office and held forth two terms during which Tascosa saw its wildest times.

In this medieval period of his administration there were many who found it hard to keep step with the march of events.

There were times, however, when the conflict of old customs and new conditions confronted the sheriff with more delicate problems than the drumming up of a county commissioner pro tem. And it is worth while in passing to note the fact that many of his constituents were willing to meet him half-way when it came to solving some of these diplomatic difficulties. One who did not stand so high in the estimation of his fellow-men would have failed to get this consideration, of which a notable instance is recorded in the affair of Ed Norwood.

HIS other name—the one with which he was born—does not matter, and the fact that there was one is mentioned merely because it has to do with the story. That he dispensed with it was due to some uncharitable grand jury in southern Texas whose members had a narrow prejudice against the plea of self-defense. So as Ed Norwood he came to the Panhandle with a trail herd in the early days. During that period his brother drifted into the country.

The years went by. The brother had stuck by the name which his parents owned. The range was wide, and few of its riders ever knew of the relationship. So it came to pass that when Johnnie Maley slew this brother in Tascosa, neither he nor Sally Emory so much as suspected that there was any one in the Panhandle whose filial affection for the victim would urge him to act in the role of a Nemesis.

The murder was of a foulness to warrant hanging its doer as high as Haman. Sally Emory, who was among bedizened entertainers in Jess Jenkins' dance-hall, played the part of Delilah, and Ed Norwood's brother was asleep when Johnnie Maley left his work of serving drinks in the Jenkins establishment to steal up to the cabin and put a bullet through the cowboy's brain. There was official investigation. The facts were plain enough for any to see,

but of legal proof there was none. The guilty pair went free and deemed themselves secure.

Ed Norwood did not even come into town for the funeral. He said no word to any man but remained out on the range for several months until all talk of the affair had blown over.

Then he came to Tascosa. He put his horse in Jim East's corral—for the sheriff was his friend from the old days back in southern Texas—and he hurried to Jess Jenkins' dance-hall. There he drank deeply, or at least he made a good show of so doing, and he danced with Sally Emory. He danced with her many times, and, as one far gone in liquor, he boasted of his "stake." He flourished gold—it was for gold that the bartender had slain his brother—and finally he let himself appear to yield to drowsiness.

By which means he attained his end and lay, as one deep in slumber, on the same bed where his brother had been slain.

He lay there for a long time, but for some reason the bartender did not come. At last Norwood grew impationt. He went back into the dance-hall where Johnnie Maley was busy serving drinks, and shot him through the heart.

The smoke had not cleared from the long room before the cowboy was on his way to Jim East's corral. He was saddling his pony when the sheriff came and explained that friendship has its limitations. The arrest was made without any trouble, and at the April term of court the prisoner told his story to the grand jury.

For some reason or other that body voted an indictment charging first-degree murder.

It was good law, but the cowmen of the Canadian felt no less anger because of the fact. This, they told one another, was crowding things too far. There were about three hundred of them in Tascosa at the June round-up meeting and they discussed the question of what to do about it.

If they had not owned a high respect for Sheriff Jim East they would have hit upon a solution without any trouble or loss of time, but as things stood they did not want to embarrass him by making him party of the third part at a jail-delivery. Not only that but, knowing him as they did, they were confident that such a proceeding would be accompanied with quite a bit of flying lead. The choice of killing a respected friend or being killed by his sawed-off shotgun did not appeal to them, somehow. There was much quiet debating before they hit upon a way out of the dilemma.

That evening Sheriff Jim East went to his rest congratulating himself that the town was keeping remarkably quiet. But his first slumbers were interrupted with a rude suddenness that brought him out of bed in one leap. It was evident from the number of shots that the day's quiet had been but the precursor of a bigger storm than was usual even in Hogtown, whence the noise came. On his way down the street the sheriff overtook his deputy, L. C. Pierce, and, like his chief, Pierce bore his sawed-off shotgun.

THE battle was still raging when they reached the dance-hall of Jess Jenkins, and there must have been forty men engaged. Guns were flaming through windows and from behind overturned tables. To shoot into the melee without warning was out of the question. The officers entered the doors with leveled weapons and calling the old command:

"Hands up!"

The shooting stopped. The order was complied with. There was some delay in certain quarters, of course, but such reluctance was always to be expected, and it gave way before the menace of the two pairs of muzzles. At last peace was restored, and there was a compar-

ative degree of quiet.

"Now, what's the matter?" the sheriff demanded. He got, as usual, various versions and proceeded calmly to adjudicate. Before he had done there came to him, as a faint breath of suggestion, the feeling that something was wrong. Thus far the play, as he would have put it, had been coming mighty fast, but now, with time for reflection, it did not look exactly right. For one thing, where were the dead and wounded? He glanced about and, finding none, grew thoughtful. Then he departed from the dance-hall and hurried back up the hill. Nor was he greatly astonished when he saw the little rock jail in which Ed Norwood had been incarcerated since that March day of the killing. What did beget his wonderment was the size of the hole which the cow-men of the Canadian had made in the stone wall during the limited time at their disposal.

"Ed sure didn't have to bend his head when he came out," he confided to his deputy. "You could drive a cow through it."

To say he was unappreciative of the fine feeling which had brought his constituents to the trouble of staging the battle, in order that he might not be embarrassed by being present at the jail, would be to do him an injustice. But he knew his duty, and he lived up to it by going forth after the fugitive.

He stuck to the trail until it vanished somewehre over on the Pecos. And that his good friends had expected this was afterward proved when it became known that they had mounted Ed Norwood on the fastest horse that could be produced on this side of the Panhandle.

All of this happened in the spring of 1883 when another and more far-reaching event was taking place, an affair which had its influence on the whole Panhandle and, for that matter, on ranges thousands of miles away.

It originated in the changed conditions which have already been mentioned. Many of the big outfits were in the hands of absent owners to whom the cow business appealed only as a dividend producer. These sent their own managers out West to handle affairs, with the result that the Panhandle's old-timers witnessed the advent of numerous ambitious young men, none of whom—as the saying goes—would know his own photograph if he saw it on a cow.

There were graduates from Eastern colleges, big-game hunters, tea-planters from Ceylon, and that breed of English younger sons who became known throughout the West as remittance-men. Most of them were good drinkers, and some of them were good riders, once they got the hang of the stock saddles with their long stirrups, but here their fitness ended.

Poor management means small dividends, a condition which was further aggravated by the inevitable constriction of the range. Small dividends as usual brought wage reductions. The disposition of the cowboy to look askance at a tenderfoot was heightened when these tenderfeet slashed the payrolls. The old loyalty to the owner was fast vanishing.

Over near the head of the Red River the J A outfit had fallen into the hands of the Adairs, who were Irish gentry. One day when the news went round that Mr. and Mrs. Adair were coming out to visit the ranch, the punchers held a big medicine talk among themselves and determined to make their fortunes by kidnaping the pair. The names of the bold spirits who conceived the plan have not come down, but it was perfected to the point where the conspirators build a dugout in a secluded spot, stocked it up with the best food they could procure, and hung the earthen walls with the finest Indian blankets.

All that was lacking was the victims themselves but, before their arrival, Charles Goodnight heard rumors of what was going on, and when they ap-

peared a troop of cavalry accompanied them. Which put an end to some high hopes.

BUT the spirit that prompted this bizarre plan continued to grow stronger until, in the spring of 1883, it culminated in the cowboys' strike.

For months before this most unique of American labor demonstrations the saloons of Tascosa had noticed a falling off of business. There were about two hundred of the recalcitrants, and every man of them was saving his wages. When the big day came they drew their pay and departed to gather at a rendezvous on the Alamasitos, twenty-five miles or so southwest of the county seat. They had stocked up with provisions and a goodly supply of whisky, they sent their ultimatum to the owners—it amounted to some twenty dollars a month more than the existing wage-scale—and they "holed up" to await results. Round-up season was near at hand. It looked as if they must have their way in the end. They killed their own beef, ate and drank their fill, shot at marks and did their best to find out who among them was the biggest liar, to pass the time.

But there was one thing with which they had not reckoned; it was the wages which were weighing down their pockets. Even the hazards of draw-poker failed to relieve the restlessness which the presence of that money brought upon them. Finally, when they were able to stand it no longer, they rode in a body to Tascosa.

Sheriff Jim East already had his hands full, for court was in session at the time, and the presence of two hundred cowboys, every one of whom was bringing with him a large portion of his year's savings and a good-sized grievance, promised to make life in the county seat not only deeply interesting but to an extent uncertain. He thought the matter over and decided to resort to diplomacy. So he sought out Tom Harris, who was the head of the movement, and had a talk with that industrial reformer and his aides.

"That's what I'm up against, boys," he said when he had recapitulated the existing complications, "and if there's any trouble now it means we've got to call the Rangers. We never needed 'em yet in Tascosa, and I'd sure hate to have you fellows put that disgrace on the town." They agreed to keep order among themselves.

That day the sheriff posted a sign at the top of the grade to remind the more tumultuous spirits of the edict which restricted promiscuous shooting to the limits of the lower town. On the next morning when he was on his way to the courthouse he found his notice riddled beyond perusal with big-caliber bullets. Some men would have looked upon the desecration as a challenge but, having himself known days when—like the cowboy of the famous "Lament"—he was wont to go prancing in the saddle, he understood the spirit which had prompted the marksmen. So he said nothing.

Hogtown of course passed through a hectic springtime, but the prosperity which accompanied the visitation did much to mitigate any hard feelings on the part of the various dance-hall proprietors.

Meantime the strike was making poor progress, and the resources of the strikers were fast dwindling. One day the leaders determined on a coup, and a company of fifty-odd protestants marched en masse to call upon old Jot Gunther, who was one of the foremost of the cowmen in opposing their demands. His ranchhouse was a few miles out of town, but when they drew near it was evident that the news had gone before them, for the cowman stood on the front steps with his single-shot Sharp's buffalo-gun. Just to let them know his sentiments on the subject of arbitration, he sent two or three fifty-caliber slugs along their forefront.

"That ol' rifle boomed like a cannon," one of the strikers told the audience who gathered about him in Tascosa an hour or two later, "and every bullet done kicked up a bucketful of dust. We just made up our minds to leave Jot Gunther be as long as he was feeling that-a-way about it."

And that was about all there was to the cowboys' strike.

But the following summer witnessed the departure of many who had been top hands, and for several years the emigration continued.

AND now rustling of a new sort began throughout the Panhandle. In the old days cow-thieves had been for the most part of two varieties: arrogant owners who had clapped their irons on every animal that came their way, and those bold marauders who drove off whole bunches at a time. In place of these stealthier craft now altered brands or recruited their herds by sleepering.

The processes of brand mutilation are various and intricate, but all of them amount merely to changing the original mark. Sleepering is different. There always were "sleepers" on every range, calves which the owners' cowboys had found unbranded—usually because the mothers had managed to hide during the round-up—and which they simply earmarked. Some time later on they would brand them. The thief who resorted to this method was sometimes an employee of the man whom he was robbing and sometimes a neighbor. Finding an unbranded calf running with its mother, he gave it the proper earmark and let it go. Later, when the little fellow was weaned, he put his own iron on it.

It was hard to catch the thieves. There were many of them, and there were increasing numbers of settlers who sympathized with them because of the inevitable hostility between the nester and the cowman. The owners clubbed together at length and employed a detective agency whose name was famous, and the agency sent out an operative. But the man had not been in Tascosa a week before every rustler in the place knew what he was seeking. And one night a number of them took his revolver from him, poured a libation of beer into its barrel, and ducked him in the nearest watering-trough. After which he departed for the East and was heard of no more along the Canadian.

Then came the two-gun men.

Bar-room gladiators the old-timers called them in derision, for they were of a vastly different breed from the warriors of the Canadian who had guarded their employers' herds against Indians, outlaws, and over-reaching neighbors in the early days.

These new-comers did no work on the range or in the branding-pens but rode the fastest horses and, when the fancy seized them, went to town to spend higher wages than the top hands drew. Their business was to exterminate the rustlers and to guard the managers.

Being hired to slay, they had to make good, of course, and it is a matter of record on every range where these fellows worked that the vast majority of their killings were done in cold blood. Most of their victims were hapless nesters. Invariably their presence, instead of clearing up an ugly situation, increased the complications until the culmination came in a pitched battle. This was the case in Oldham County.

Among the gladiators here were three whom the managers of the L S outfit had hired: Fred Chilton, Frank Valley, and Ed King. Tascosa came to know them well, and before long the inevitable feud grew out of their visits to the county-seat. Among the members of the other faction were Lem Woodruff, who had formerly been a puncher with the L X outfit, Louis Bozeman, and Charley Emory, who had likewise worked for various cattlemen of the Canadian, and the "Catfish

Kid," a long-haired individual with a penchant for garments of fringed buckskin. He had gained unenviable notoriety by slaying an unarmed stranger who had refused to dance for him.

There was the usual interchanging of threats through third parties accompanied by the usual increase of tenseness in the atmosphere while the community waited to see whom it was going to bury and whom it was going to bring before the grand jury. And on the night of March 21, 1896, Sally Emory—the same Sally whose accomplice the cowboy Norwood had slain—goaded Ed King into going forth to kill Lem Woodruff.

That day King had ridden into town with Fred Chilton and Frank Valley, who were at this time playing billiards in Jim East's saloon. That Woodruff would be waiting for his coming never entered his mind. Perhaps one less susceptible would have done a bit of reasoning and taken into consideration the fact that the bartender had been in high favor for a long time with the woman. It may have been vanity that blinded him to possibilities of any treachery. At any rate he went to Martin Dunn's saloon, where Woodruff worked, and took with him John Lang, a cowboy.

THE saloon was closed—which was enough to make a man take thought, for the hour was early as hours were reckoned in Tascosa—but King and Lang went straight on—until Lem Woodruff and Charley Emory opened fire upon them from ambush.

The ambuscade was well chosen, a narrow space between the saloon and the adjoining building, and only the pistol-flashes marked the location of the pair in the darkness. Ed King's body was torn by two big-caliber slugs before he was aware of the presence of his enemies. He was dying then, but by the time he fell he had managed to do some pretty accurate shooting on his own account. Emory staggered away badly wounded, and Woodruff dragged himself to a cabin in the rear of the saloon with a bullet through his groin.

John Lang meantime was running as fast as his legs would carry him to the Equity Bar. Here he proclaimed the news to Chilton and Valley, and the two billiard-players dropped their cues to draw their revolvers. They raced to the spot where their companion's body lay and plunged into the narrow alley between the buildings. In the rear of the saloon they caught sight of Jesse Sheets, who had left his all-night eating-house to find out who was being killed. Valley's gun flamed; Sheets fell with a bullet in his forehead.

The pair did not wait to investigate but went on to the cabin where Woodruff had taken refuge.

Sheriff Jim East, who lived on the upper floor of the courthouse, had been awakened by the shots and was already on his way to the scene with his double-barreled sawed-off shotgun. He arrived in time to see a portion of the events that followed and, from the conflicting versions of those events, his has been chosen for this narrative.

About the cabin where the wounded Woodruff crouched a three-cornered battle was raging, for when Valley and Chilton had fired five shots through the door, the enfolding night was cut by rifle flashes. The identity of the men who did that shooting was never legally established, but they lay among the sand-hills which surrounded the litter of cabins and outbuildings. Chilton fell, and as he was dragging himself to an old well-curb a second bullet killed him. Valley pitched forward, shot between the eyes. And Jim East came on a run in time to see the last rifle flash.

As he drew nearer to the cabin the sheriff caught sight of two horses tethered on the summit of one of the sand-hills. He would perhaps have paid more attention to the animals at the

time had he not seen the Catfish Kid slinking away, rifle in hand.

"Drop that gun," Jim East shouted and brought his own weapon to his shoulder. The Catfish Kid was raising the rifle when the shotgun bellowed. But at the moment the sheriff was pulling the trigger some enthusiast who had followed him to the fray fired a Winchester so close to his ear that he staggered back half stunned. So the buckshot missed their target. But the Catfish Kid had enough. Before the smoke cleared away he was standing with both hands reaching heavenward. Thus he was taken into custody, and later Woodruff, Emory, and Bozeman were arrested.

Now, as has been said, the so-called gladiators were never popular among the cowboys of the Panhandle, but the element whom the other faction represented was perhaps liked even less. And when the funeral of the four victims was held the next day Tascosa was crowded by men who were a trifle more than willing to fight at the lowering of an eyelash. The saloons closed during the brief ceremonial.

Virtually all of the town turned out at the burial of the three L S men in Tascosa's Boot Hill, and every male in the throng was heavily armed. But Sheriff Jim East and his deputy Pierce were very much in evidence, and the day went off without further bloodshed. The unfortunate Jesse Sheets was given sepulture in the Casa Romero pasture and, by the irony of fate, there was a mere handful of mourners to follow the body of the innocent bystander to his grave.

The days went by, and the feeling continued to run high. It was intensified when one of the absent owners of the L S came down from Kansas City at round-up time and brought two dozen fighting cowboys to town with him. He sought out the sheriff one evening.

"Look here," he said, when he had beaten about the bush a bit, "you're tired out with all this work and chasing up witnesses. You've got those fellows in jail now. Why don't you take Mrs. East out to the ranch and have a good rest? Stay a week or two."

JIM EAST smiled as he shook his head. "I aim to stick around here," he answered. "You see, if these prisoners are going to be hung, it's going to be because Judge Willis says so. There won't be any lynching." The cowman argued, but the sheriff remained obdurate.

"I took my oath to enforce the law in my way, not in yours," was his final ultimatum. He backed it up with vigilance. There was no further talk of mob law.

So ended the big shooting-scrape in Tascosa. The prisoners, it may be added, were subsequently acquitted over in Mobeetie and went their ways.

In the days to come President Lee, of the Lee Scott Company, owners of the L S outfit, induced Jim East to take the job of general manager instead of running a third time.

"I'll take it on condition I can handle things my own way," were the sheriff's terms. And when he went to the ranch his first move was to dispense with the hired gunmen.

During the next year the railroad came to Tascosa. It was an event for which men had been waiting with eagerness. High hopes had been built on it. Yet, when it occurred, the town began to languish. It was as if Tascosa had stood all it could stand with the law's coming, as if this arrival of steel rails was too much.

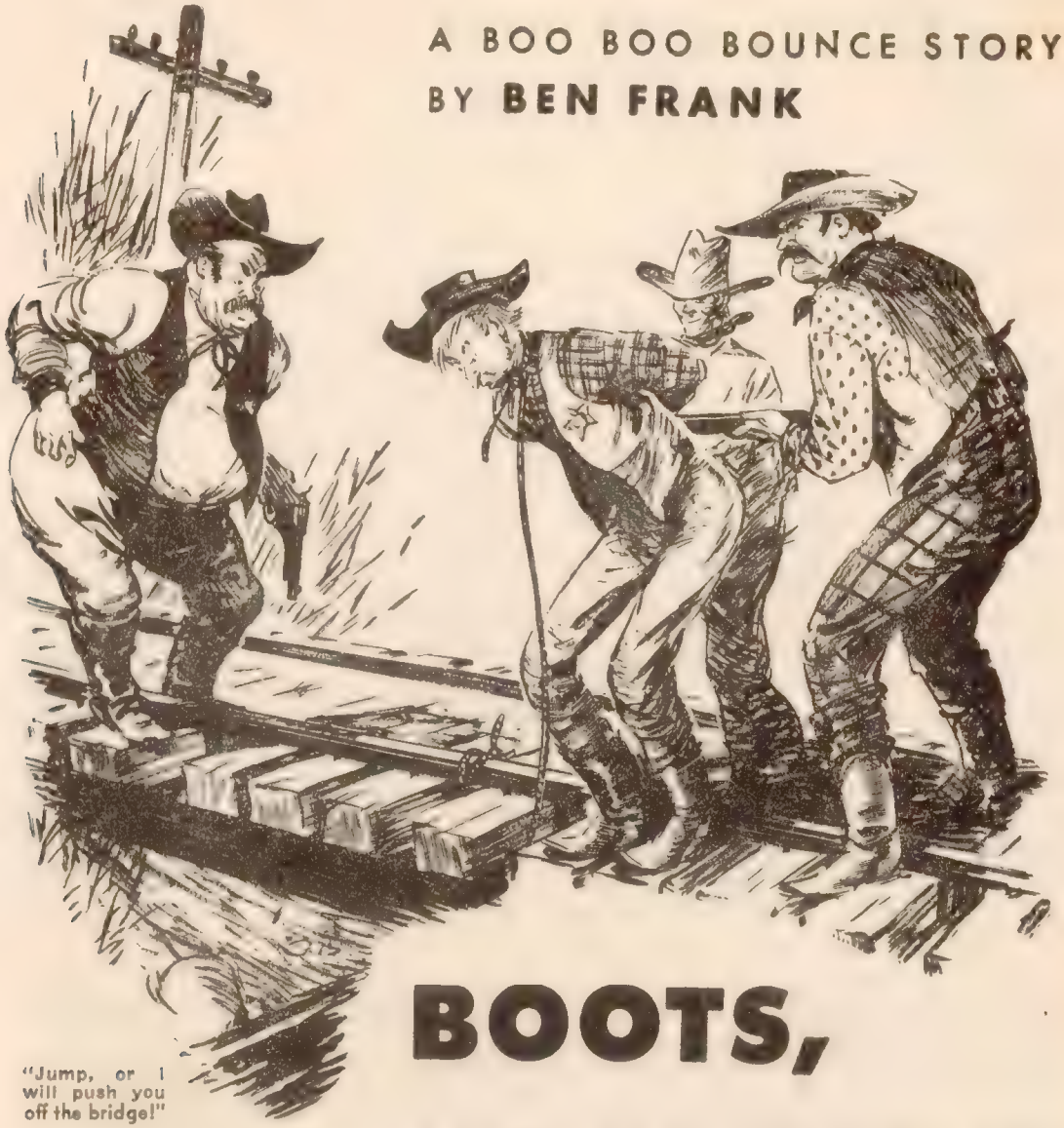
Soon afterward they moved the county seat to Amarillo. A year or so later a cowman, who visited the spot on the north bank of the Canadian where the traders used to rendezvous with the Comanches in the old days, looked over the crumbling abode walls.

"Well," said he, "she done died with her boots on."

Deputy Hopewell's hankering for a bright new pair of kickers sends him a'hunting footprints down the paths of the owlhoot!

A BOO BOO BOUNCE STORY

BY **BEN FRANK**



"Jump, or I will push you off the bridge!"

BOOTS,

AND NO MISTAKE

IT IS along toward late afternoon, and me and Boo Boo Bounce are setting in the jail office, him being the sheriff, and me being none other than the deputy of Coyote County, U.S.A. For a long time now, we have not said nothing, for Boo Boo is leaning forward in his easy chair, twiddling his fat thumbs very energetic and glaring at the checkerboard on his desk. I am doing nothing else but brooding no little despondent on account of my wife will not give me no money.

"Boots!" I say aloud more or less

accidental. Boo Boo gives a start that makes his chair groan, while his three chins quiver very indignant.

"Hopewell," he says, "leave us not utter no sudden sound whilst I am deep in thought!"

He reaches out a fat finger and moves a checker; then leans back in his chair and frowns fierce. Also, he swears somewhat harsh to himself.

"Hopewell," he says, "trouble never comes single."

"True," I respond. "Both my boots has wore out together, and no mistake!"

"Deputy," he says icy, "do not sidetrack the main issue by talking of boots. For thirty days, I have been unable to beat Whistle-stop Willie one single game of checkers."

"Sheriff," I say sad, "leave us not worry about Whistle-stop Willie and the checkers. Leave us figure out a means by which I can get myself a new pair of boots. You do not want your deputy running around and about in his bare feet, do you?"

"Deputy," he says distant, "compared with the rumor there is a masked owlhooter on the loose, yore boots is indeed inconsequential, and then some. Also, this is Whistle-stop's last day in our jail. Trying to beat him at checkers during his sojourn with us has wore me down to a nub besides making me a nervous wreck along with the worry of this masked bandit talk I hear."

"But," I say, "a deputy has got to have a decent pair of boots, especially when there is a rumor of—"

"For the last time, Hopewell, I will not loan yuh no money for boots." he interrupts. "From now on, kindly do not annoy me with the same. Also, rumors is rumors until they become facts."

He reaches into a pocket and pulls out a silver dollar.

"Whilst I am playing Whistle-stop Willie one final game of checkers before his sentence expires, kindly go over to Nail-head Nutter's store and buy me a assortment of fish hooks and lines. Tomorrow, I am going fishing to rest my—"

THE door slams open very noisy, and there is old man Juniper from the Squaw Hills.

"Sheriff," he bleats, "I have gone an' been robbed!"

Boo Boo turns somewhat pale. "By whom?" he asks hoarsely.

"By the masked bandit. He stepped out from behind a tree an' pointed a gun at me an' says, 'Empty yore pockets!' He took eighty-seven cents, a plug of tobacco an' two brass suspender buttons. Then he laughed loud an'—"

"Two suspender buttons?" Boo Boo says.

Then he gives me a wink and smiles fatherly at Juniper.

"June," he says, "a owlhooter would not take two brass suspender buttons. Yuh have been drinking too much of yore—"

"No such thing!" old Juniper says angry.

"Tut, tut," Boo Boo soothes. "Run along like a good boy and do not annoy me with the things yuh have saw whilst under the influence of liquor."

Mumbling to himself, the old hombre walks out and slams the door, making the windows rattle.

"Mebbe," I murmur, "there is a masked bandit who—"

"Hogwash!" Boo Boo snorts. "That ole buzzard is allus seeing things."

He shoves to his feet, picks up the checkerboard and waddles through the door that leads to the jail cell where Whistle-stop Willie has been locked up these past thirty days for being a tramp, which makes him a vagrant, and we do not allow such to run loose in Polecat.

I see there is no chance to borrow money from Boo Boo to buy myself a new pair of boots, so I get up and go out into the street, which is hot with

sunshine. In fact, the dust is so hot that I can feel it burn through the thin soles of my worn-out boots, and I am very unhappy, and then some. I sigh deep, thinking how it is when you are married to a wife who has three brothers and is very careful with your money.

While I am thinking thusly, who should I meet but Hoss-swap Hoover, a long-legged jasper who has been in Polecat only some six weeks and is a very shrewd gent, and no mistake, when it comes to hosses and matching dollars.

"Hopewell," he says, "yuh look sad indeed."

I realize he is a very friendly hombre for so short a acquaintance and am somewhat touched.

"Hoss-swap," I say, "do you have a idea of where a respectable citizen, who is the deputy sheriff, could borrow a few smackeroos to buy himself a pair of new boots?"

He shakes his head no little brisk. "Hopewell, I ain't got no idea what-so-ever on that subject," he says.

I see that he is not going to offer to make me a loan, so I go on down the street toward Nail-head's store.

When I come to the post office, Grandma Grinder steps out. She is no bigger than a sawed-off fencepost and twice as homely; but I know she has a heart of gold as well as a lot of money which old man Grinder left her when he died, she being his wife at the time, and is known in and around Polecat as a generous giver to the poor and needy.

"You look mighty fine today, Grandma," I say, tipping my hat no little polite.

"Got a letter from a charity institution in the East," she says. "Gonna send 'em a hundred dollars."

"Charity begins at home," I say, putting one foot out so she will notice the worn condition of my boots. But she does not notice it.

"He'p the poor an' needy, I allus say," she says, and clips on down the street.

No little downhearted, I cross the street. Nail-head Nutter is standing in the doorway of his store with his hands folded under his flour-sack apron and a suspicious look on his seamy face.

"Hopewell," he says, "I hope yuh're a cash customer."

I do not relish this statement, for it smacks of a slight mistrust, but I say kindly, "I am, and no mistake. I have come to buy fish hooks and lines for Bóo Boo Bounce, who is going on a vacation tomorrow."

"Why would he want to take a vacation?" Nail-head growls. "He's been on one for the last ten years."

I IGNORE this and go into the store. There is no store like Nail-head's in the wide world. In it there is practically everything piled around and about in utmost confusion.

"Le's see," he mumbles. "Seems as how the fish hooks is under these sacks of salt."

I help him lift five sacks of salt, and sure enough, there are the fish hooks in a wooden box under the last sack.

He wipes the flour-sack apron across his sweaty face and scratches his bald head thoughtful.

"Fish lines," he murmurs. "Seems like I put 'em with the dress goods. Umm—oh, here they are in this button box."

"Nail-head," I say, "how a man can find anything in a hodge-podge like this is more than I can understand."

"Speakin' of findin'," he says, "Jute Roberts dropped in an' paid me what he's owed me for five years. A hundred an' fifty dollars! Just like findin' it. Which reminds me, the banks is closed, an' I wonder would you and Boo Boo lock these three purty fifties up in the jail safe for me tonight?"

I shake my head. "Boo Boo locked the safe a month ago and cannot remember the combination to unlock it.

Why don't you hide the money here in the store?"

"I never thought of that," he says, looking around. "Where at would be a good place to hide it, Hopewell?"

I also look around. The shoe department, which is behind the meat counter, looks like a good place on account of there are so many shoes and boots scattered here and yon. Also, I have boots on my mind no little strong.

"Here, Nail-head," I say, pulling out a shiny left boot, "wad the three fifties up and stick 'em into the toe. Nobody would think of looking in a boot for money."

He does this, all the time smiling very grateful. I feel here is a good chance to approach him about a new pair of boots for me on credit, so I say, "Nail-head, how about selling me a pair of boots, which I will pay for next month?"

He suddenly does not look so grateful.

"Hopewell," he says, "this I would gladly do, but yuh have not paid me for last winter's red flannels."

Realizing the futility of further talk along this line, I gather up the fish tackle and depart. On the way back to the jail, I meet a number of Polecatters who I stop and talk to, but not one of them is a money lender. When I go around the corner of the courthouse, I meet Whistle-stop Willie, who is once again a free man.

He holds out his hand, and says, "Deputy, I am on my way to continue my travels. Meeting yuh has been indeed nice."

I shake his hand very warm.

"Whistle-stop, it has been a pleasure to meet up with a gent who has been able to beat Boo Boo Bounce at checkers."

He smiles very chipper behind his whiskers and winks.

"I let Boo Boo win this last game, for I like to leave a sheriff in a happy frame of mind. Adios, Hopewell, ole friend."

I watch him amble down the street, feeling somewhat sad. Also, I notice Grandma Grinder, but pay her no mind.

When I go into the jail office, Boo Boo is very snug in his easy chair, a pleased smile on his fat, red face.

"Hopewell," he says, "I have just skunked Whistle-stop Willie in a game. Now, kindly do not spoil the happy way I feel by asking me for money. Good-by, and do not forget to leave the fish tackle on my desk within easy reach."

I do this, and then go home for my supper.

"My dear," I say to my wife, "these old boots are—"

"Boots," she says hostile. "That is all I hear you talk about anymore, and I am getting sick and tired of it. For once and all, if I had any extra cash, I would save it to buy Christmas presents for my three brothers over in Northfork."

I finish eating without mentioning boots to her again. Realizing that she is in no humor to let me go uptown to visit with the various citizens who hang around and about the pool-hall, I go to bed early and know no more until I hear Boo Boo Bounce yelling my name.

At first, I think I am having a bad dream. Then I see that I am wide awake and that it is early morning, and still Boo Boo is yelling and pounding on the front door.

My wife says, "Go see what the big fat ninny wants before he tears the house to pieces."

I go to the door, and there is Boo Boo no little pale and with his chins quivering and his eyes bugging, and then some.

"Get on yore clothes, deputy," he says harsh.

I feel a cold chill along my spine and wish I was no longer deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A.

"The masked bandit?" I ask.

"Yuh'll find out what it is soon enough," he says.

The way he looks at me makes goose-

pimples break out here and yon on me, and I have no little trouble dressing on account of my fingers have turned to setting on the porch, waiting for me. He gets to his feet with a groan and shakes his head sad.

"Hopewell," he says, "it is hard for me to believe. Also, I hope yuh have a alibi for all of last night."

I remember the time I spent sleeping and mention this.

He shakes his head again. "Come, Hopewell," he says.

He leads me straight to Nail-head Nutter's store. We go in, and I see that everything is confusion much more than usual. Especially in the shoe department, for boots and shoes are mixed around and about with the hams and slabs of bacon, and Nail-head Nutter himself stands in the middle of the room, tearing his hair and swearing with no little gusto.

He points a shaking finger at me and bellows, "Thief!"

"Leave us be calm till we get to the bottom of this," Boo Boo says. "Hopewell, is it true that yuh suggested to Nail-head that he hide a hundred and fifty smackeroos in the toe of a boot?"

"Yes," I answer faintly. "Why?"

"Why?" Nail-head bellows. "It is like this, and no mistake! I forgot to lock a back window, an' yuh sneaked in last night an' took the money out of the boot! How do I know? I have looked in the toe of every boot in my store, an' not a single one of 'em has my three fifties in it. Yuh are the only jasper that knew I put the money in a boot, so yuh're the one who stole it!"

"Leave us be calm," Boo Boo says again. "If Hopewell is guilty, I will see that he is locked up very tight in the cooler. What have yuh got to say for yoreself, Hopewell?"

"I am innocent," I say very indignant. "Nail-head is as blind as a bat and likely missed finding the money."

"We have both looked," Boo Boo says cool. "There ain't no money in any one of these boots what-so-ever!"

Then I have a bright idea.

"Mebbe Nail-head sold the boots to some gent?"

"There was not one single gent in my store after yuh left," Nail-head says. "Only Grandma Grinder come in an'—" Suddenly he looks no little foolish. "Come to think of it," he says weak, "Grandma bought a pair of men's boots."

"Why would Grandma buy—" I begin.

"No matter," Boo Boo cuts in. "Leave us go to Grandma's and inspect said boots for the hundred and fifty smackeroos."

NAIL-HEAD locks his store very tight, and the three of us hurry along the street to Grandma Grinder's cottage. She is up and around and pulling weeds out of her pansy bed.

"Grandma," Boo Boo asks, "would yuh kindly leave us have a look at the boots yuh bought from Nail-head yesterday?"

"I'd be glad to," she says, "only I bought 'em for that poor man yuh have kept locked up in yore jail for bein' out of a job. He put on the boots an' wore 'em away."

"Yuh mean Whistle-stop Willie?" Boo Boo groans.

"I believe his name was William somethin' - er - other," Grandma says. "He'p the poor an' needy is my motto."

"Boo Boo, yuh got to find him," Nail-head says hoarsely. "If yuh don't I will raise a howl that'll make people vote twice at the next election to kick yuh outa office!"

Boo Boo's fat face turns somewhat pale, but he squares his shoulders and looks Nail-head in the eye very direct.

"Friend," he says, "never fear. Boo Boo Bounce allus gets his man. Come, deputy, leave us saddle up and go search for Whistle-stop Willie and his new boots."

I say nothing until we have our hosses saddled and are ready to ride, and Nail-head has gone back to his store.

"Boo Boo," I say, "we got no idea of where at to look for Whistle-stop Willie."

"True," he says, "but none-the-less, we have got to look. And may I add that I am put out with yuh utmostly. Not only have yuh spoiled my fishing trip as planned, but also yuh have added one more burden to my already weary shoulders. Hopewell, yuh may consider our search for Whistle-stop Willie yore last official act, for after then, yuh are fired, and no mistake!"

"That is no little unjust of you," I say. "Especially after I have wore out my boots by running errands for you."

"All that is water over the dam," he says. "Now, leave us shut our mouths whilst I think where at Whistle-stop might be."

We ride in silence, Boo Boo very deep in thought, me sad, and no mistake, for I realize without a job I will soon be going barefoot, and winter is not far distant. Also, my wife will be no little unhappy on account of she holds to the old-fashioned idea that a husband should support the wife he is married to and help her buy her three brothers Christmas gifts.

Right in the midst of our thinking, a gent comes riding up like he has bumblebees after him. He is none other than old man Beasley, who owns the Lazy-B. One glance tells me he is utmostly upset about something, and no mistake.

"Sheriff," he bellows, "the masked bandit slipped into my house early this mornin' before daylight, pulled a gun on me an' took four thousand dollars cattle money I was paid yesterday evenin'!"

Boo Boo takes a firm grip on his saddle horn to keep from falling. His face turns the color of a sunbleached tomato.

"So there is a masked bandit?" he says faint.

"Yuh danged tootin' there is!" old Beasley says, his handlebar mustache twitching very fierce. "An' he's one of them smart-alecky kind. He took my money an' give me a brass suspender button. 'Never let it be said,' he says, 'that I don't give somethin' in return for what I take.' Then he laughed like he had done somethin' very joky-fied."

Boo Boo and I exchange glances. We are remembering how old man Juniper was robbed of two brass suspender buttons.

"Troubles," Boo Boo sighs, "never come single."

"Like wore-out boots," I begin.

"Deputy," he cuts in severe, "leave us not sidetrack the main issue. Ride back to town for our guns. And kindly do not forget the ammunition for same like as of previous. Friend Beasley and I will hurry on to the Lazy-B to search for clues."

I set spurs to my paint and kick up no little dust on the way back to Polecat. I rush up the steps to the jail office, get Boo Boo's .44 out of the desk drawer and my shotgun from where it stands in the corner of the room. Also, I do not forget shells for both.

On the way to the Lazy-B, I take a short-cut which follows Skunk Creek for some distance, going under the railroad bridge just this side of Dead Hoss Ravine. And what should I see protruding from under the bridge but a pair of socks with a sizable hole in one through which a big toe is sticking out. I pull my paint to a stop and see that the feet belong to none other than Whistle-stop Willie himself, who is sound asleep in the shade with his head resting very cozy on a flat rock, while some very basso snores rend the air.

Then I see setting beside him a pair of boots, but they are by no means new, and I have a feeling that all is lost. I slide from my hoss, climb up to where he is at and poke him in the ribs with my shotgun.

"Wake up," I say businesslike, and he opens both eyes pronto and is wide awake.

"Oh, hello, Hopewell," he says, setting up. "So we meet again, which is indeed a pleasure."

He gathers up a few-odd rocks and tosses them at a telegraph pole, hitting it dead center each time.

"I used to be a baseball pitcher," he explains.

"Leave us not bother with rock tossing," I say firm. "Where is the new boots Grandma Grinder give you?"

"Oh, them." He sighs very unhappy. "I swapped 'em off. Yuh see, the left one kept hurtin' my big toe, so—"

"Why did it hurt your toe?" I ask.

"I never got it figured out," he answers. "Seems like there was a lump, or somethin', in it. How-some-ever, a gent come along just about daybreak. I mentioned how this new boot was a-killin' me, an' he kindly offered to trade me these here ones. I might add that they do not feel comfortable like my old ones did which I left with the kind old lady who give me the new pair. Hopewell, there is nothing more comforting than a pair of boots which yuh have wore on yore feet many months."

"Whistle-stop," I ask faint "who was this gent?"

"I do not know. I might add likewise that I cannot tell yuh what he looks like for it was not full daylight yet an' he wore a hat kinda pulled over his eyes."

"Whistle-stop," I say with no little disgust, "you are less help than a bad case of typhoid fever. That lump in the left boot was, without doubt, made by three fifty-dollar bills which Nailhead Nutter hid in it. Incidental, if I do not recover that money, I will find myself out of a job, for it was I who advised him to hide the money in the boot."

Whistle-stop looks very sad indeed and smacks the telegraph pole with another rock.

"Hopewell, I am utmostly sorry."

"Sorry!" I snort. "That is no help. I have a mind to take you back to Polecat and toss you in the cooler for another thirty days!"

His face turns pale beneath his whiskers.

"I would not like that," he murmurs, "for I have hopes of catching a slow freight and seeing more of the wide world."

I pick up his boots and see that they are much better than the ones I have on. This gives me a idea which solves my boot problem very neat at present.

"Whistle-stop," I say, "should we trade boots, I will say no more about locking you up for thirty days."

He sighs and wiggles the big toe sticking through the sock very despondent.

"Yore boots ain't worth shucks," he growls, "but since yuh are a very fine gentleman in some ways, I will swap."

I kick off my boots and put on his, which fit somewhat snug in spots. He sighs again and shoves his feet into my old boots, which are too big for him by a size or so.

"Hopewell," he wails, "there is no doubt about it, my feet rebel against strange boots. Why I ever let that kind ole lady give me a new pair is more than I can understand."

I DO not feel thusly about strange boots, but I realize Whistle-stop and I are not one and the same, which makes the world go around, so I say nothing, but get back on my paint and ride on to Dead Hoss Ravine. There I turn north and follow the ravine until I come in sight of the Lazy-B ranchhouse. Here I see numerous Lazy-B cowpokes, old man Beasley and Boo Boo Bounce around and about.

When I ride up, Boo Boo says, "Now that we have our weapons, we are ready to start running down the bandit."

I hand Boo Boo his .44, which he takes very careful, for he is gun-shy

and no little afraid that it will go off when he does not expect it to.

"Have you found a clue?" I ask.

"Indeed yes, and no mistake," he answers. "We found a footprint near the well in a soft spot. Our man is wearing a right boot what has a three-cornered patch on the sole."

I walk over to the well to have a look at the footprint. Boo Boo and Beasley, also. I step up close and study the footprint very intent. Sure enough, there is a right sole mark with a three-cornered patch showing.

"Should we meet up with a gent who has such a boot as this," I say, "we will know he is the masked bandit, and no mistake."

"Once I get my hands on the varmint," old man Beasley says, "we'll string him up pronto."

"Yippee!" some of his rannies yell no little bloodthirsty.

I shiver somewhat, for I am naturally a gentle soul with little taste for hanging and what not.

"Remember," Boo Boo says with dignity, "I, a officer of the law, will demand a just and fair trial for said culprit."

I see some of the cowboys exchange winks, and I realize that Boo Boo will have some trouble in conducting a just and fair trial should we catch this hombre, and no mistake. I step back from the well curb. Very sudden, a no little quiet settles down upon one and all, and I see Boo Boo and old man Beasley and some four or five cowpokes staring pop-eyed at where I have just stood. There, as plain as a steer in a pig pen, is my right boot track in the soft ground, and the sole mark shows a three-cornered patch!

"Hopewell is the masked bandit!" old Beasley roars.

Before I can get out one single squawk, two boys grab my arms, and a third loops a rope over my head. At that precise moment, a fourth climbs up the windmill with the free end of the rope in one hand.

I find my voice from where it has sunk into the bottom of my stomach. "Leave us not rush into this business of hanging me by the neck, gents," I say. "These are not my boots!"

"Hold in the name of the law!" Boo Boo bleats, and old man Beasley puts a stubby finger against his fat nose, and says, "Keep yore big mouth shut, Boo Boo!" Then he turns to me. "Talk fast, Hopewell, for yore time is short, and no mistake!"

"It is like this," I say no little shaky. "While coming here with the guns, I met a jasper by the name of Whistle-stop Willie, and traded boots with him."

"But," Boo Boo puts in without thinking of consequences, "Whistle-stop had a new pair, and these ain't!"

"I reckon that spills the beans." Beasley grins evil.

The rope tightens about my windpipe, and I sputter, "A man cannot talk distinct with a noose squeezing off his wind."

Old man Beasley loosens the rope a trifle, and I explain very precise how it is about Whistle-stop trading the new boots Grandma Grinder give him to a stranger for the ones I am now wearing. I see much doubt written on one and all's faces, so I remind them I have a dear wife to home who would not want her husband strung up to a windmill. Besides, I am innocent and can prove all by Whistle-stop Willie.

"In the name of justice," Boo Boo gurgles, "leave us ride to the railroad bridge and confirm Hopewell's story."

Beasley takes the shotgun and holds it very firm.

"Turn him loose, boys," he says, "an' we'll do as Boo Boo says. Incidental, should Hopewell make so much as a tiny move to escape, I will fill him with buckshot."

"A railroad bridge is better to hang a man from than a windmill, no-how," one of the boys says.

I do not like this attitude, but I say

nothing as we mount and ride to the railroad bridge. When we arrive, I see at a glance that Whistle-stop Willie is no place around and about, and a weakness creeps into my knees.

"This is the payoff!" Beasley says with a vicious pull of his handle-bar mustache. "Boys, do yore stuff, and if Boo Boo so much as opens his fat mouth, I will let him have both barrels in the bread basket. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me none if he is in this bandit business along with his deputy."

Boo Boo's face loses all color, and he sags limp against a tree. I see there is no help from him. In fact, there is no help from anybody, and I have a very funny feeling, that is not exactly funny, in my stomach. They tie my hands behind my back very snug and lead me to the middle of the bridge. Then they put one end of the rope about my neck and tie the other end very neat to a rail.

"Now," Beasley says, giving me a little nudge with the shotgun, "take yore choice, Hopewell. Either jump, or I will push yuh off the bridge."

I look down at the water many feet below and wish I was some ten thousand miles elsewhere. "This I say, "is very drastic punishment for a innocent man such as I, and no mistake."

THEN I see a rider coming along the creek on a white hoss at a fast clip. He is none other than Nail-head Nutter, and he is yelling something about three fifties in the toe of a boot. For the moment, everybody is so busy watching him that I am more or less forgot.

"What's a-goin' on?" Nail-head yells, and old man Beasley explains exactly what is, adding a few choice cuss words.

Nail-head shakes his fist at me.

"So yuh are the masked bandit, Hopewell," he roars. "Now I know for shore yuh stole my three fifties!"

"Lucky I come when I did, or you loco jaspers would of hung Hopewell, an' then we would never have found where he has hid our money at."

Old man Beasley looks kind of foolish and twitches his mustache.

"I never thought of that," he mutters. "Boys, unloose the varmint."

"There is another point to consider, also besides," Boo Boo speaks up brave. "How could Hopewell be at the Lazy-B this morning, robbing yuh, while at the same time him and Nail-head and me are looking for money in the toe of a boot?"

Nail-head looks no little disappointed.

"Why, that is so," he mumbles. "Hopewell could not be two places at once, not the way he moves."

"Why in thunder didn't yuh tell me this before?" Beasley snorts, "instead of standin' around like a fat baboon and let us about hang a innocent man, which Hopewell may, or may not, be?"

"Yuh wouldn't let me talk," Boo Boo answers feeble. To this, Beasley says nothing whatsoever.

"Gents," Boo Boo goes on, "leave us mount and ride to Polecat, for I have not et since early morning. A man cannot catch a masked bandit on a empty stomach."

The cowpokes agree with this pronto. Beasley looks at Nail-head doubtful, but Nail-head slowly nods his head.

"Boo Boo is right about one thing, at least," he says. "A full stomach gives a man courage and fortitude."

So we head back to Polecat.

There is only one place to eat in Polecat besides home, and that is at Stinky Joe's, so we all go into his place and help ourselves to a row of counter stools. I find that someplace along the way I have lost my appetite, so I set staring first at my plate of ham and beans and then through the window.

I cannot forget the feel of that rope around and about my neck. Also, I realize that Nail-head and Beasley are giving me the evil eye. As for Boo Boo Bounce, I know he is somewhat doubtful of me, even if he did not want

to see me hung especially. I wish utmostly that Whistle-stop Willie was here so that I could prove for once and all that I did not make up the yarn about swapping boots with him. Besides, my feet hurt, for these boots are much too small and pinch fierce.

I saw off a bite of ham and heist it toward my mouth, but do not get it there, for at that moment, I see Hoss-swap Hoover walking along the other side of the street. Something about the way he walks makes me set up straight and stiff and think why I feel thusly. Then I realize what it is. He is limping with his left foot, and it comes to me that I have never saw him limp at no other time previous.

He stops in front of the post office and pulls a cigar from a pocket and bites off the end. It is then that I have a sudden hunch. "The masked bandit!" I choke, leaping for the door.

I rush across the street to where Hoss-swap stands, him puffing no little content at his cigar, and I try to see if he is wearing a new pair of boots, but there is dust an inch thick on them, and I cannot tell nothing of their newness. So I say firm, "Hoss-swap, in the name of the law, take off your left boot!"

He takes the cigar from his mouth and stares at me in no little astonishment. By now, Boo Boo and the Lazy-B outfit have caught up with me. They also look at me like I was a two-headed calf with a stomachful of loco weed.

"Hey, what is the matter with yuh, Hopewell?" Hoss-swap growls. "Why should I ought to take off my left boot?"

"Because you're limping with your left foot," I answer.

"So what?" he says. "The boot ain't got enough toe room for my foot."

Boo Boo lets out a gurgle and likes to fall in a faint, for he has caught on to what it is all about.

"The three fifties!" he bleats.

"Precisely!" I say. "Hoss-swap is the hombre who traded boots with Whistle-stop Willie, thusly making it possible for me to get the boots with the patched sole. Hoss-swap is the masked bandit who left a footprint by the windmill!"

"Hold on," Hoss-swap says gritty. "I ain't been near no windmill. True, I traded for these boots, but I also traded for the ones I traded off. What is this about three fifties?"

"That is why you limp," I say. "There are three fifty-dollar bills rolled up and stuck in the toe of your boot."

"I do not believe it!" he clips.

He bends over as if to remove his left boot. Old man Beasley pulls out the brass suspender button and flips it up and catches it. "Search the varmint!" he roars. "If he's got my four-thousand cattle money, I'll stuff this button down his throat!"

Before yuh can bat an eye, Hoss-swap Hoover is standing up straight with a gun in each hand pointed at us.

"Yuh won't search me!" he hisses. "Drop yore guns into the dust, an' do not take all day about it."

That is as far as he gets, for a rock comes whistling from the alley and cracks him very neat on the side of the head. He loses all interest in us and falls flat on his kisser.

We turn about and see none other than Whistle-stop Willie come walking out of the alley, a big grin on his face.

"Whistle-stop," I gasp, "what are you doing back in Polecat, tossing rocks?"

"I come back on account of my feet," he says. "They insisted I get my ole boots from the kind ole lady who—Incidental, since I have rapped this desperado on the noggin, I hope yuh will not consider me a vagrant and lock me in the cooler for another thirty days. I am fed up on playing checkers. Besides, I want to see more of the wide world than the inside of a jail."

"If Hoss-swap Hoover is the masked bandit," Boo Boo says, "yuh will be welcome to come an' go as yuh please."

AT THAT moment, who should come rushing up but old man Juniper, and he is pointing a quivering finger at old man Beasley who is flipping the brass button into the air.

"The masked bandit," old Juniper yells hoarsely. "That is one of the buttons he stole from me!"

He hauls off and hits Beasley on the nose, and Beasley sets down in the dust no little hard. A couple of the boys grab Juniper before he can jump a-straddle of their boss.

"Boo Boo," Beasley yells, "do somethin' with that crazy old maverick 'fore I fill him full of buckshot!"

Ignoring this, Boo Boo waddles over to where Hoss-swap lays, feels around in his pockets and comes up with another brass suspender button similar to the one Beasley was flipping.

"I reckon this proves that Hoss-swap is guilty," he says.

By then Nail-head has off Hoss-swap's left boot and digs out three crumpled fifty-dollar bills. Then Hoss-swap comes to, and seeing how things are, admits he is none other than the masked bandit. We find old man Beasley's four thousand smackeroos tucked very neat in the top of the owlhooter's right boot.

"Gentlemen," Whistle-stop Willie says, "may I say before I depart to see the wide world that to Deputy Hopewell yuh all owe much thanks. Remembering how he has been wantin' a new pair of boots, I believe yore duty is clear."

With that, he turns and walks toward the depot. In the distance, I hear a freight train whistle, and I know I have likely saw Whistle-stop for the last time.

It is that evening while I am setting at home with my wife that Boo Boo Bounce comes in with a box under one arm.

"Hopewell," he says humble, "for solving the mystery of the masked bandit here is a little present for yuh."

I open the box, and there is a new pair of boots.

No sooner does Boo Boo leave than along comes old man Beasley. "For helpin' me recover my cattle money," he says grateful, "I'm givin' yuh a little somethin', Hopewell."

And he hauls out a new pair of boots from under his coat.

He don't hardly no more than get out the door when in comes Nail-head Nutter with a bulge under his flour-sack apron.

"Hopewell," he says, "for finding my three fifties, I am givin' yuh this pair of boots with my best regards."

He pulls out a pair of new boots and lays them on the table; then walks out, leaving me no little astounded and staring at these three pairs of lovely boots. But not for long, for my wife gathers them up and begins stacking them away very snug in a closet.

"Hopewell," she says, "these boots are indeed too shiny and nice for such as you to wear around and about. I will save 'em and give 'em to my three brothers for Christmas presents."

"But, my dear," I protest, "the boots I am wearing are too small and hurt my feet no little, and then some. You would not want your husband and the deputy of Coyote County, U.S.A., to go limping around."

"Oh," she says, "I have a old pair that is just your size you can wear. Grandma Grinder give 'em to me."

And she reaches into the closet and pulls out a old pair of boots and tosses them across the room to me, and I see that they are none other than my worn-out boots which I traded to Whistle-stop Willie and which he left with Grandma Grinder when he come back after his own boots.

I feel no little faint and dizzy, and begin to mumble, "Boots, boots, boots."

"Quiet, Hopewell!" my wife says hostile. "They are boots!"

She is right. They are boots, and no mistake!

a novelet by D. B. NEWTON

York moved forward toward the fight, gun in hand

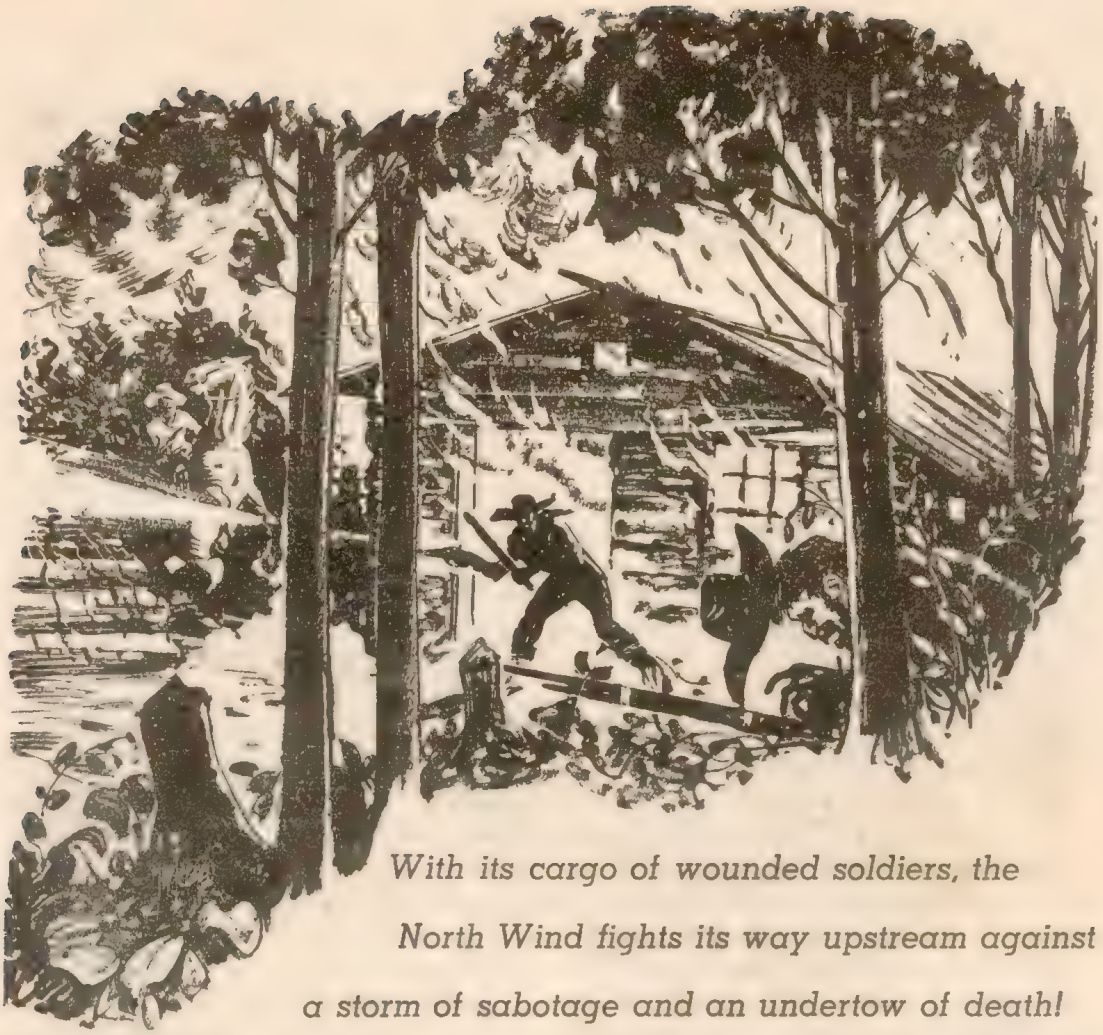
SATAN

I

YORK GRAYDON, on the texas of the Missouri River packet *North Wind*, felt the steady throb of stern wheel paddles churning silted water and watched the swirl of the river in front of her bow. His young, smoothshaven face had a frown as he considered the situation.

The river was dangerously low, even for May. Ripples eddying in the brown current indicated shallows and treacherous unseen sandbars. Here on the lower river, boatmen always had to contend with this low water at the tail end of the spring season, after the swell of melting winter snows had passed and before the thaw hit northwest peaks and glaciers, and made itself felt in the annual "June rise" that once more had put life into the lagging steamboat traffic.

Adding to the trouble was the fact that the *North Wind* was riding low in water, wallowing under a heavy consignment of freight in the hold, and the added burden of near seven hundred wounded Union soldiers, headed upriver for hospital camps in Iowa state. They overflowed the cabins and the saloon. Their bedrolls were scat-



With its cargo of wounded soldiers, the North Wind fights its way upstream against a storm of sabotage and an undertow of death!

RULES THE RIVER

tered across the main deck and the hurricane and, looking at that jumble of sprawling, blue uniformed men in varying stages of pain and helplessness, York Graydon knew the grim pull of responsibility.

He remembered the fate of his father's other boat, the *Lucy Belle.* She had been loaded with wounded too, the night her boilers blew. Not many had been saved. York went a little sick, picturing in his mind the awfulness and horror that must have been on the river that night.

Dan Mitchell, captain of the *North Wind,* stepped out of the pilot house. He was a solid, redfaced man with a blue cloud of heavy beard showing beneath the skin of his jaw. Putting a sulphur match to his briar pipe, he gave York a brief nod above the flame.

There was no friendliness in him, and York Graydon sensed this. With a steamboat captain's jealous pride, Mitchell resented the presence of this younger man and his authority.

"*River Queen* pulling astern of us," Mitchell said.

York looked back, saw the other craft. She was a big eight-boiler boat,

her twin stacks belching smoke in long black scrawls across the bright sky. Sun striking the tawny river dazzled his eyes, but squinting against this he could see that the stretch of water between was quickly narrowing, that presently the *River Queen* would be pushing ahead of them.

SHE carried no wounded. She was a luxury boat and her owner, Will Butler, had no intention of cluttering her decks and cabins with troops. His passengers were all wellheeled civilian traffic, fleeing the holocaust of the War and heading upriver to Montana and the gold camps. His holds contained cargo for Fort Benton, as well as for the Nebraska jump-off towns where bull trains waited to freight the river goods westward across the Overland Trail.

The Graydon Line had handled that Montana business once. Now, hampered by an Army contract which old Tom Graydon had been too patriotic to refuse, it had to abandon that upriver trade and confine its boats to plying back and forth between St. Louis and the Iowa rest camps with its precious cargo of wounded men, and loading for the rest with what consignments could be picked up in the Nebraska ports.

Suddenly York Graydon's jaw tightened. A tall, slim figure had emerged from the pilot house of that other boat and stood staring across the water at him. Will Butler was a darkly handsome man, with a look of power in his easy, spreadlegged stance. The two boats were near enough that York could see the amused expression under the tipped-back visored cap, the twisted smile of the hard mouth beneath its clipped mustache. And Butler's voice sounded thin but clear across the slip of the intervening river, the throw of the engines: "Having a hard time getting that rowboat upstream? Want us to throw you a towline?"

A muttered oath burst from Mitchell. Already the other craft was slipping past them. Butler called back, "Try putting up a sail. Or throw another stick of firewood under the boilers—if you can find one."

His laugh floated across the churning, muddy water. From the decks of the *River Queen,* passengers and deckhands who had heard the taunts, waved and cat-called to the pair on the texas of the slower boat. They were answered by angry shouts from the wounded troops lining the *North Wind's* rail.

York Graydon turned quickly, to see Mitchell's broad back set square with fury as the captain headed swiftly toward the pilot house. York swung around, following. As he stepped through the doorway he saw Mitchell, at the speaking tube, barking orders down to the engine room: "Full speed, dang it! We'll show that—"

Graydon cut him off. "Don't be a fool! We'll have no racing with a load of wounded on board!"

The captain turned slowly. At the wheel the pilot was watching with detached interest. His presence made the spur to Mitchell's already hurt pride.

"By heavens, I'm still the captain of this boat!"

"I admit that," York answered quietly. "And that you know more about steamboating than I ever hope to—"

"Then quit giving me orders. I don't care if your old man does own the line I work for; that don't mean that a yellow, swollen-headed—"

York hit him.

It was an instinctive movement, and it sent the older man slamming back against the wall of the tiny pilot house, just missing the big wheel. The captain's cap fell from Mitchell's curly head and he stood hunched there, chin thrust forward, his glare touched with astonishment that this slight-bodied youngster would have dared to tackle him. His big hands clenched. They looked big enough to break the other man in two.

But York Graydon eyed him and said

evenly, "I would be yellow if I took that without an argument. Now, let's forget it. I don't want to fight or give orders to the best river man my father ever had on his boats.

"But can't you see Butler was just goading us on? He'd like to have us tie down the safety valve, throw lard on the fires and try to race him with this load we've got aboard! He'd like to see the *North Wind* go up like the *Lucy Belle.*"

SLOWLY, Mitchell's big hands opened. He was breathing hard, still glaring at the younger man. Then, twisting about, he grabbed the speaking tube, bellowed into it, "Forget what I said. Lay off the fires!" And without a word he shoved past York Graydon and his steps faded out along the texas.

York frowned, knowing relief but also deep unhappiness. It had been humiliating for Mitchell, and York respected and liked the man. He glanced at the pilot briefly, then followed the captain out more slowly.

He knew what these cocky, gossip-loving River pilots were. At the finish of this run news would leak and spread all up and down the lower Missouri—the story of how young Graydon had had a run-in with Mitchell and the *North Wind's* captain had had to eat crow before his employer's son.

York dreaded that. There was trouble enough without dissension within the company. He could imagine Will Butler's arrogant face. He would welcome this news.

Butler was trying to smash the Graydons.

Flat, bushy banks continued to slip past, as the boat crawled laboriously upstream against the tide. Sometimes, with a load like this and the tawny river so low, a boat had to resort to "double-tripping"—unloading half the cargo so as to raise the bottom in crossing a particularly shallow stretch, then dropping the rest of the load there and going back for the first half. All such expedients took time, and time was something they couldn't spare.

Not only did these wounded troops have to be taken to their hospital camps, but the freight in the hold was stuff that had been held up so long in the warehouse at St. Joe, waiting for the *North Wind* to find a chance to load it, that now it must be pushed through to its consignees at Nebraska Landing or the company would be faced with a very bad situation indeed.

York Graydon paced the decks of the slow-moving packet, down the ladder to the hurricane where the uniformed men lolled on their blankets, some smoking or playing cards or whittling, others lying motionless with arms shading their eyes from the sun, enduring the pain from crudely bandaged wounds.

As York picked his way among them he met many a cool, impersonal stare. Behind those eyes, he knew, was the common thought: A likely piece of minie-bait. Why ain't he in uniform—on one side or the other?

Face wooden, he went on his round. These men didn't know that York Graydon had been on his way to enlist with the Union Army when hurried news reached him that his father, old Tom, had been wounded in a guerrilla attack on another Graydon boat, the *Lexington.* Now York, young, untried, resented by the seasoned rivermen, had the whole weight of the Graydon responsibilities on his shoulders.

Old Tom was recuperating, slowly. The *Lexington* lay in drydock, awaiting repairs for damages sustained in that guerrilla attack. The *Lucy Belle's* fragments lay on the Missouri bottom, result of an accident as mysterious as it was terrible, since there was no evidence that the boilers had been overworked when they exploded. Only the *North Wind* was left of a once prosperous packet line. Because nothing must be allowed to happen to this last

boat, York Graydon was riding it, keeping his own eye on the run of things —and winning the enmity of its captain.

Reaching the main deck, York saw that the boat was warping in toward the west bank where a woodyard showed its corded stacks of cottonwood and willow. It took thirty cords a day to feed the insatiable maw of a packet's boilers, and that meant frequent stops to replace the supply of fuel stacked around the engine room. York didn't know why he suddenly remembered Will Butler's taunt: "Throw another stick of firewood under the boilers—if you can find one!" Surely that hadn't held any sinister meaning.

NEXT moment he heard the yell of the woodhawk, calling from the bank. "Don't put in here! We're sold out."

"What do you mean, sold out?" Captain Mitchell bawled back across the water, as the pilot's bell rang and the boat drifted on idling engines.

"Nothing left but green wood," came the answer. "All the rest has been contracted and paid for!"

York Graydon had joined Mitchell at the forward rail. "By whom?" he demanded. "Will Butler?"

The woodhawk only turned away, without answering. York's face had become grim as he turned to the scowling Dan Mitchell. "How much wood do we have left in the ricks?"

"Not much," said the captain. "We'll try at the next yard."

Yet here the answer was the same; and both York and Mitchell knew what it meant. Will Butler, speeding upstream ahead of them in his lightly laden *River Queen,* was buying up every stick of dry firewood, using money and threats to persuade every woodyard on the Lower Missouri not to do business with the rivals he was out to beat and drive against the wall.

Their own differences momentarily forgotten in the face of this menace, York and the boat captain held a conference of war.

"Since Butler moved up here from New Orleans at the outbreak of hostilities, with his string of Mississippi boats, he's been set to break the Graydon Lines," said York, grimly. "We're the biggest and best-organized to resist his efforts to build a monopoly that will extend clear from St. Louis to the Montana ports. So far he's done all right. I'm convinced he was behind the guerrilla raid that put my father in the hospital and the *Lexington* in the repair yard. If I could prove he had anything to do with that explosion on the *Lucy Belle* I'd go after him with my bare hands!

"Now, if he can tie the *North Wind* up on this trip for lack of fuel, he probably figures he can steal the last of our consignment trade from us at Nebraska Landing. The next step will be an offer to buy us out, at his own figure!"

"We're burning up the last of our wood right now," said Dan Mitchell. "I could warp in to the shore and send the crew out to chop some, but that's too slow and green stuff won't burn." He added, "Of course, we could arm the crew and take what we need."

York shook his head. "They're probably just waiting for us to try that!"

"Only one other chance, then. Ben Avery's yard is just ahead of us—around that timbered bend. He's a tough old rooster, and a good friend of Graydon Lines; it would take a good lot to make him and his two boys sell us out. Maybe we can get enough wood from him to take us on to port."

"I'd forgotten Ben," York Graydon admitted. "Yes, it would take more than threats to make that old woodhawk throw in with his squeeze play. We'll give him a chance." He hesitated, added slowly: "And listen, Dan; about that trouble this morning—"

The harshness of Mitchell's face stopped him. There was a discolora-

tion on the captain's bearded jaw where York's blow had struck. It turned darker now, as a surge of blood rushed into the steamboat captain's face.

"We won't talk about this morning," he grunted. "Not until we finish this run, anyway. When I get back to St. Joe, I intend to have a settling with Tom Graydon."

He turned sharply on his heel, strode away leaving York beside the rail in warm spring sunlight.

York felt the bunching of muscles along his jaw. He knew the man intended quitting when this trip to Nebraska Landing and back was finished —Dan Mitchell, his father's best and most loyal boatman! A kind of sick despair flooded through Graydon.

Everything York had tried to do, in these weeks since taking over in his father's place, had gone wrong, had proved York's youth, his incompetence and inexperience. He simply did not know how to manage and keep the loyalty of men who were older and knew more than himself. To face the threat of Will Butler's ambitions, old Tom's sure hand was needed at the helm, and instead there was no one but a green youngster who bungled and made worse every job he tackled.

Suddenly he whipped about toward the rail. The churning paddles were bringing the *North Wind* around the brush-choked bend in the broad river, and into sight of old Ben Avery's woodyard. And now York Graydon saw that it had, indeed, taken more than threats to break the old woodhawk's loyalty to the Graydons.

Flame and smoke were billowing up to the clear sky, from dry and quickly burning stacks of willow and cottonwood. And, as he stared transfixed at that scene of destruction, York heard again the dry crackle of gunfire.

II

EXCITEMENT seized the boat. The blasts of her whistle echoed from the low bluffs across the channel, and her prow was turned quickly toward the bank as the deck hands came running with firearms ready.

To York Graydon, in his impatience, it seemed the slow-moving *North Wind* would never reach shore. He could see running figures limned against the burning stacks, brandishing torches. He had a six-shooter from the pocket of his coat but the distance was too great for gunfire.

When the blunt prow touched bank, he was over the rail, slipping to his knees in shallow water and then plunging up the bank with the crew behind him and the wounded soldiers yelling encouragement from the decks. He almost stumbled over a prone, lifeless body, and recognized it as that of one of old Avery's bearded sons.

It was too late to save any of the woodstacks. They were going with a roar of flame in dry timber, and so was the tiny log hut where the woodhawk and his sons had lived.

Shooting had died almost completely the moment the boat nudged the bank. Off through the trees on the York bluff saw the sudden streaking plunge of mounted men.

As he brought his gun down for a running shot, a weapon crashed in a streak of flame, not twenty feet from him, and the bullet snarled past his bent shape.

He hit the dirt, instinctively, and as he rolled his gun muzzle came up and he flung a shot over. It was a lucky one. There was a threshing in the brush that ended almost before he came to his feet again. York moved forward cautiously, gun ready.

But the buck-brush clump was stained with red, and the sprawled body had no life in it.

With distaste, York Graydon took hold and rolled it so that the ugly, staring eyes came up.

Captain Mitchell came running up behind him.

York asked him, "Know the man?"

Mitchell shook his head. "Some river tough. They come cheap enough, in these waterfront towns."

A shout came from the brush nearby. Moving quickly over they found one of the crew bending over the form of old white-bearded Ben Avery. The woodhawk had been shot, but the smoking barrel of an old flintlock rifle beside him told he had kept up the fight to the last.

Mitchell knelt quickly, tore open the shirt to show the bullet hole.

"He's tough and he's game," he muttered. "Maybe we can save him."

The old man's eyes wavered open. "My boys!" he muttered thickly. "They got both my boys! Charlie first, and then Noah."

"Was it Butler?" demanded York sharply. The old woodhawk's glance turned to him vaguely.

"Butler?" The bearded man, face smudged with powdersmoke, shook his head feebly. "No, but he come upriver on one of his boats, couple hours ago. Wanted to buy up all my wood. I knew the *North Wind* would be along and I wouldn't sell."

"Then who raided you?"

"Jack Leech was givin' the orders, blackheaded son of Satan! If I ever notch my sights on that ugly busted nose of his, I'll—"

The voice trailed off, the clenched hands, rockhard from wrestling with saw and timber ax, went limp.

"Passed out!" grunted Dan Mitchell.

York straightened. "Jack Leech. I've heard of him. A guerrilla, isn't he?"

"That's right; though not many along the River know him by sight. I guess old Avery would."

YORK stood a moment, looking around him. The westering sun touched the heads of cottonwood and willow, laid the shadow of the bluff far out upon the tawny river. He knew the wood ricks on the *North Wind's* main deck were all but empty, and the last hope of refilling them had gone up in flame here at this raided woodyard. He shrugged heavily, turned to the boat captain.

"Guess you'd better get the old man on board and see if the Army doc can patch him up. And have graves dug for his sons."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mitchell.

"If I can locate a horse—maybe one the raiders left—I'm going on to Nebraska Landing. We've got to make some kind of arrangement about this cargo, or lose our business there entirely!"

Mitchell nodded sourly. His stolid face showed he still nursed resentment over that scene in the pilot house.

He said, "These soldiers ain't going to be fond of the idea of tying up here indefinitely, either."

York found a mount, tethered in the trees where Jack Leech's men had left him. It was an ugly, toughmouthed brute but he kicked it in the jaw and it settled down, headed north along the dim trails and towpaths that lined the River. Soon York hit a good wagon road and held to that at a steady clip, pointing toward the port town that was his goal.

The raiders had gone this way ahead of him, he was certain. He saw what looked like fresh tracks of a dozen broncs, and he could even smell the settled dust. But he caught no sight of them and did not want to. Odds of one against twelve was too high.

He came upon Nebraska Landing with late evening. He was dusty, worn, and hungry. The little port, the bustling, busy center for the bull trains that pulled out for the Platte Valley trail and on to Colorado and the western Army posts, made a pattern of lights lifting up the bank from the log docks, where freight warehouses received their consignments from the holds of the River packets.

York Graydon rode directly for a

large white house upon the bluff, the most pretentious dwelling the town could boast.

It was so situated as to command a fine view of the broad Missouri's arc, the hills on the Iowa side, the steamboats tied up at the dock below or trailing their smokes majestically up or down the stream. York tied his borrowed horse to a hitchpost that had the shape of a little colored boy reaching to take the reins, and he went up the gravel path and across the deep veranda.

Lamplight from the windows lay upon the grassy lawn. At his knock a colored servant opened the wide door.

"Mr. Parmenter?" York asked.

He was let into a broad hallway, where a handcarved mahogany staircase curved upward into shadows. He had waited here only a moment, dusty hat in hands, when a tall, gaunt-shaped white-haired man came from the open door of the drawing room.

"Young Graydon, aren't you?" said Harry Parmenter. There was a question in his glance as he offered York a veined but hard and callused hand.

"This is a business call," York told him. "I'm sorry to break in upon your home, looking as I do, but it was urgent."

"Well, come in and have a drink first," the old freighter insisted. "It can wait that long."

For all the wealth his enterprise had brought him, Harry Parmenter was the same large mannered, unpolished frontiersman who had taken his first string team out on the old Cumberload Road, forty years back. York Graydon knew he would be fair with any man, but if you won his displeasure, your name would stand for nothing in Nebraska Landing, or in any of the other freighting towns along the lower River. His influence was that great.

There had been a murmur of voices from the drawing room, that broke off when the servant went in to announce a visitor. Now as York was ushered in ahead of his host, he halted just inside the tasseled doorway at sight of the two persons in the room.

THE bright-haired girl, seated in one of the big overstuffed chairs by the table with its crystal lamp, was Harry Parmenter's granddaughter, Jean, whom York Graydon had met once or twice before, briefly. He thought again that she was one of the most attractive women he had ever seen. The future heiress of old Parmenter's fortunes was popular up and down the river. But it was the room's other occupant, the lean, darkly handsome man who stood with his shoulders against the mantlepiece, who next caught and held York's quickly sharpened glance. For the man was Will Butler.

At sight of the newcomer, Butler straightened slowly, and a puzzled anger flickered behind his glance. Quickly he concealed his annoyance. There were greetings, brief and noncommittal, between the two men. Jean Parmenter smiled and nodded to York, impersonally, her glance taking in his trailstained appearance.

York felt ill at ease in her presence and in the expensively furnished room, knowing that he needed a shave and that his clothing was mud stained and that he smelled of horse sweat. But then Harry Parmenter handed him a glass, and the taste of the liquor, and Butler's mocking glance, put a new recklessness in him.

"My business—" he began.

Parmenter said, "We can go to my study if you want."

"Not necessary. It won't take long, and if Miss Parmenter won't be bored I would as soon discuss it here." He finished off his drink, went on crisply, "Mr. Parmenter, I won't be able to put your freight on the wharf within the time you gave me."

He saw quick displeasure darken the old man's eyes. "That sounds bad,

Graydon. I don't like to be unfair, especially since I've done business with your father for a number of years and I know the hard luck that's been hitting him. But just the same—"

"It's more than hard luck! Someone is working deliberately to break the Graydon Lines. He hasn't stopped at anything—not even murder. Oh, no," he added quickly, as Parmenter started to interrupt, "I'm not making any charges, not in public. I haven't any proof. But—" and his eye was steady on Butler's suddenly scowling face "—I know what I know. And my enemy knows I am on to him.

"The *North Wind* is tied up downriver tonight, with seven hundred wounded Union troops on board, and unable to move because the only woodyard, where I could have bought fuel, was burnt out and its owner killed by this certain person's hirelings." He did not think it best to let Butler know Ben Avery had escaped death, and had identified the attackers. "If you want your freight, Parmenter, I'm afraid you'll have to send wagons and teams down there tomorrow and haul it in. I'll pay for the additional expense, and at least it will get your freight here within the specified time."

Harry Parmenter was pacing the thick-napped carpet. His granddaughter, worry in her eyes, was looking from one to the other of the three men, her head tilted back to show the lovely line of her throat, bright curls glinting in the lamplight.

The old freighter said, "I'll send a string of wagons down the River road first thing in the morning. But—can't you come out in the open, if you have any charges to make? The proof can wait till later."

'I'm sorry,' said York. "There are reasons why this is hardly the time or place for naming names. But I can promise you this: If anything should be done to harm the *North Wind* while it lies helpless and loaded to the hilt with wounded troops, or if anything is done to prevent your teams from getting that freight from her hold and up here to Nebraska Landing, then, proof or no proof, I'll take the matter up myself with the guilty party!"

THEN Will Butler said smoothly, over the flame he held to the tip of a long, thin cigar between his hard lips:

"You're looking straight at me, Graydon! And I don't like it." He shook out the match, dropped it into the fireplace and removed the cigar from his mouth. His eyes bored challengingly at York.

"Speak your mind," he went on. "Cheap insinuations aren't gaining you anything. You're trying to make something out of the fact that I've been buying all the wood I can find on the lower Missouri. Of course I have, for there's been bad Indian trouble between here and Fort Benton and a lot of the woodhawks have been massacred or scared out. I can't take a chance of not picking up enough fuel along the way to get my boats to Montana and back. But I defy you to prove me a criminal on no better grounds than this!"

Stunned by the shrewd manner in which Will Butler had turned that duel of wits against him, York could only stare for a moment, his tired, stubbled face white, his hands clenched. Jean Parmenter had risen from her chair, one slim hand pressed against her throat. Something glinted brightly and York's glance flicked that way quickly, held on what he saw there. On a finger of that hand, her left, the girl was wearing a large and sparkling diamond.

He had heard that Will Butler was making his play to win old Harry Parmenter's granddaughter. He saw now, for the first time, how far the thing had already gone. But sight of that ring sealed York Graydon's lips. There were some things a guest could simply not allow himself to say.

His voice was tight as he repeated,

lamely: "I'm not mentioning any names or making any charges!" And turning to Harry Parmenter: "You'll send your wagons out tomorrow?"

The old man, stony of face, nodded curtly. A moment later, after a few mumbled good nights and brief thanks for the drink that had been served him, York Graydon found himself outside on the veranda of the white house above the river, the cool night breeze soothing against his face.

Would he never play his cards right? Would he ever cease to be a blunderer and a hopeless young fool? There in that drawing room, Will Butler had handled him with supreme adroitness. He had called for a showdown with York Graydon and York had been forced to back away.

He knew Harry Parmenter well enough to understand that the old two-fisted bull train man had only contempt for one who failed to follow through on a thing as serious as the charges York had been making, even though the man accused might be betrothed to old Harry's own granddaughter. But with no basis of proof, there was nothing York could have said. The result had been complete victory for Butler, and maybe, before the wind up of the affair, the loss to Graydon Lines of Harry Parmenter's consignment business, a fatal blow at a time like this.

And yet, as he swung to saddle and rode in dark mood down the path to the center of the little River town below the bluffs, York Graydon wondered why the principal thing he took away with him from that ugly scene was the shocked look in Jean Parmenter's clear brown eyes, and the mocking glitter of Butler's stone upon her hand.

III

NEVERTHELESS, his mind was working ahead, hunting a solution the immediate problems that faced him. He had something to eat in a water-front beanery, found a cheap hotel and checked in there for the night. Tired as he was, it was late before he slept, and he rose while the sun was only a rosy gleam through the mists that hugged the broad river.

After three hours of searching among the warehouses on the docks, he found what he wanted, a portable sawmill, shipped in by some hopeful who had expected to make his fortune supplying ties for the proposed Union Pacific Railroad west of Omaha. The outbreak of the war had ended railroading activity before it began, and the sawmill had found its way into the dusty shadows of this River port warehouse and been forgotten.

York Graydon paid a good sum for it, and also picked up a pair of oxen for the wartime price of a hundred fifty dollars. Then he went down to the wharf and chartered space on a down-going steamer which was leaving for St. Louis with almost empty decks.

He did not see Will Butler that morning, but he did meet Harry Parmenter on the docks and the old man went past him without a nod or a word of recognition. York Graydon's jaw hardened. Plain to see the old man had taken offense at his actions last night.

But though losing Parmenter's business, if it came to that, could prove the final blow for the already crippled steamboat line, York moved doggedly ahead. He was at the rail of the hurricane deck when the boat carrying his sawmill and oxen swung away from the dock and turned her nose downstream. It made good time, heading with the silty current. In hardly more than an hour York's searching glance sighted the *North Wind* tied up to the green bank at Avery's burned-out woodyard.

The scars of the fire showed blackly. Planks were down, and deckhands were at work unloading the boat's cargo and transferring it to the bull wagons Parmenter had sent, using the woodyard's level shingle as a loading dock.

A vague feeling of relief went through York Graydon as he saw that there had been no further mishap during his absence. He hardly knew what he had expected. More than likely, Will Butler considered he already had his competitors licked and would let things rest awhile as they stood. Maybe when he learned about this sawmill he would change his mind, would realize that, poor as was the showing he had so far made in fighting back, this green youngster at least had an idea or two of his own.

The boat idled in toward shore, threw out planks and tied up long enough for the sawmill to be deposited on the mud bank and the oxen to be driven off. It left again and moments later Dan Mitchell joined Graydon, a question in his glance.

York told him, "I thought we had better find a way to make ourselves independent of the woodyards. With this on board we can swing out a stage when we sight a likely looking stand of timber, run the oxen ashore and drag a few big sticks aboard. Then we can saw it up as needed."

He saw new respect in the sharp glance of the captain. "Good idea," Mitchell said grudgingly. He added, "How about hiring old Ben Avery to run it for us? His sons are gone, and he himself won't be in any shape to swing an ax for a long time."

"I was thinking of that," York agreed. The Army doctor, he learned, had done a good job of patching up the bullet hole in the old woodhawk. For the time being, though unable to do any work, he could at least supervise the running of the mill, with whose machinery he was familiar.

Quickly Mitchell had part of his crew felling timber for the mill, and their axes rang across the quiet of the afternoon. The last of the freight had been discharged and was rolling away in the bull wagons. On deck York found the temper of the wounded troops wearing thin under this enforced layover, so he passed out word that they would be pulling away shortly.

THE whine of the sawblade began presently, and the short lengths of firewood started piling up in the ricks about the engine room door. They had managed to keep the boilers warm. A head of steam started to build and toward sunset the haze of smoke trailing from her stacks thickened and the chimneys rolled billowing black. Ragged cheers went up from the troops as the *North Wind* pulled away from the shore and once more headed upstream.

It was a clear moonlit night and, despite the threat of sandbars, the pilot said he could handle the boat all right. Dan Mitchell was anxious to push ahead and make up the lost time. It would be possible to save some now by bypassing Nebraska Landing, hitting instead straight for the town on the Iowa side where their Army passengers would debark.

York Graydon had told Mitchell a little of the scene with Parmenter and Butler. He said, "Butler admitted buying up the wood, but he had some halfway plausible excuse that impressed the old man. When we stop at Nebraska Landing on the downtrip, I'll go in and see Parmenter. But I have a premonition the news is going to be bad."

The *North Wind* carried another boatload of troops when she nosed into the Nebraska Landing wharf two days later. These men were convalescents who had completed their stay at the hospital camps and were headed for St. Louis and, from there, would rejoin their units in the field.

While some of them were still stiff from newly mended wounds, others were filled with high spirits and with the mounting tension of returning to the battlefields. Almost before the planks were put ashore, they hit them and went rampaging into the riverfront

town, in groups and knots of uniformed and yelling men. They had a two hour layover and they were heading for the grogshops, with a soldier's feverish intent to make the most of every free moment and every new town that comes his way.

York Graydon, musing that but for the run of events he himself would have been a soldier in blue at this moment, already dead, perhaps, on some Virginia battlefield, went alone to Harry Parmenter's office at one end of the great freight warehouse. When he came away fifteen minutes later, a tight white line was drawn about York Graydon's clean-shaven mouth.

It had been just as he expected. Old Parmenter had hemmed and hawed a little, then came bluntly to the point:

"I've been in business a good many years, and I've always noticed when a man's luck sours, it don't get better. You had three boats; one blew up, one's disabled, and the one that's left don't keep to her schedules. I can't afford to tie my business in with that kind of a losing proposition."

York said stiffly, "We won't be held up any more for lack of wood."

"Everybody in town's heard about your sawmill idea—pretty clever, too," the old man admitted. But he did not budge an inch. "It'll be something else next. I've told you, it's a matter of luck running sour."

"Or of plain, dirty sabotage!" retorted Graydon. He was getting angry. His words had the wrong effect on the old freighter.

"More wild accusations! I assure you they won't change my mind! I've decided to turn all future consignment business over to Mr. Butler who, after all, is practically a member of the family. I'm sorry, Graydon, but I don't think this leaves much more for us to talk about at the moment."

"No, it doesn't!" snapped York Graydon. "Except that this isn't putting us off the river. Long as Graydon Lines own a piece of a boat big enough to float, we're operating. And the next piece of 'bad luck' somebody pushes off on us will be the last they have a chance to try!"

As soon as the door slammed behind him, however, he knew that talk sounded bigger than it was.

WHEN news got around that Parmenter's business had been withdrawn from the Graydon's, other consignments would become mighty hard to get. Even with boating scarce on the lower Missouri due to the war, other Nebraska freighters would be chary to trust their cargo to Graydon bottoms now—the jinx would scare them off. Meanwhile, the line was losing money on the head rates the Army paid for transporting soldiers to and from the Iowa camps. They were moving into the red, slowly but surely if, indeed, something didn't happen first to wreck the *North Wind*, the Graydons' only surviving boat.

He was on his way down to the dock when two men suddenly came tumbling out of a grogshop doorway a dozen feet ahead of him. They were big, bearded, and looked like a tough pair of bullwhackers, and they were fighting. Graydon hauled up, a little startled, one hand dipping instinctively to the gun in a pocket of his coat.

Fists smacked meatily against flesh. Suddenly one of the brawling pair went down, and, supine on his back, began pawing for a holstered gun. Past the spreadlegged, broad shouldered stance of the other man, York saw him drag it out, saw the black muzzle of it tipping—

Just in time he leaped aside. The bullet slapped into the clapboard side of a building, dead center to where York had been standing a moment before. He saw chagrin in the black eyes of the downed man, staring squarely into his own. Then recklessness surged through young Graydon and he was lunging for-

ward, pocket lining ripping as he jerked the sights of his gun free.

The other brawler whirled quickly. The one on the ground leveled for a second shot at York but his companion in this murder setup blocked him and he had to hold his fire. York had his own weapon out. He loosed a shot at the prostrate figure, his bullet gouting up dust near the man's elbow. Then his foot slipped on a rounded stone and he was thrown off balance momentarily.

In the same instant a chopping blow descended on his wrist and the gun flew from numbed fingers. A fist scorched against his face, driving him back. He caught himself, facing the second bullwhacker. The man was a head taller, pounds heavier than York. But York, caution thrown aside in the satisfaction of facing at last some tangible enemy whom he could strike and hurt, drove forward.

He heard the grunt of the other's breath as his fists smashed against barrel chest, against stubbled jaw. The man gave back a step. A huge, craggy fist arcked around against the side of York's head with a jar that put pain ringing like a bell inside him. He was no match for this man, he knew with returning reason. And now the man with the gun was on his feet again, circling—

Desperately, York danced aside, trying to free himself as he shook his head to clear it. Next moment the barrel of the gun came at him in a clubbing blow that he could not duck.

The earth received him, not unconscious, but unable for the moment to command his pain-numbed body. Waiting like that for a shot to finish him, he heard as from a great distance voices shouting, the report of another gun. Then he pushed up to a sitting position, his head splitting, and saw that his assailants had vanished. A moment later blue uniforms swam before his eyes and a voice said:

"It's that slacker from the boat."

He saw sergeant's chevrons, a meaty, pugnacious face above the unbuttoned tunic. There were a couple of other soldiers. He read in their eyes the faint contempt.

The noncom said shortly, "We was headin' back for the steamboat and seen them two working on you. They scattered like quail when they seen the Army coming."

York was on his feet now, swaying a little at first. There was blood on his scalp where the gun's garrel had torn it.

He said dully, "Thanks. That pair was put there to try and kill me. They faked a fight, and one of them pulled a gun."

BUT again he had no proof—certainly no way to trace this back to Will Butler. Butler, he had learned from discreet inquiries, was out of town. He had hired a mount and ridden away that morning, shortly before the *North Wind* tied up. Since the hired assassins had made good their escape, there wouldn't be any chance to find them.

One of the soldiers handed Graydon his gun and he dropped it into the torn pocket of his coat. Then the trio turned their backs on him and, because there was nothing else to do, he followed them down the slanting streets to where the boat made its scrawl of smoke across the sky, at the log wharf.

The hour of departure was near and the soldiers were drifting back in twos and threes, an officer checking a roster as they filed on board. York went to his cabin and washed the blood from his face, decided the slight tear made by the gunbarrel was not serious.

In the saloon he found the soldiers gathered in noisy confusion.

The ship's clerk passing him, said, "A passenger yonder, going down with us as far as St. Joe."

York saw the back of the man as he leaned against the bar. Stocky, black-haired, he had a carpetbag at his feet and seemed extremely solicitous of it.

He stepped out on deck. In a moment Captain Mitchell would be giving orders for the gangplank to be raised, the boat to shove off on the downriver journey. Then York Graydon saw something that filled him with astonishment.

A light buggy and team were coming to a halt on the dock, a colored driver holding the reins. From the back seat gaunt, white-haired Harry Parmenter was stepping down and reaching out a hand to his granddaughter, Jean.

Afternoon sunlight found bright gold in her hair as the girl came out of the buggy lightly. Both she and the old man were dressed for traveling, Jean with a small parasol over her shoulder; and as they crossed to the *North Wind's* gangplank, the colored servant followed, hands filled with luggage.

Coming on deck they were met by Captain Mitchell, and York Graydon was in the background. Parmenter said, "I want to book passage for myself and my granddaughter."

Whatever Mitchell was thinking, he kept his thoughts concealed behind his stolid face, but his cheeks grew a little flushed.

"There's a pretty rough crowd of troops aboard," he said, stiffly, "but they won't be apt to bother you in the ladies' cabin, aft."

York Graydon couldn't resist the temptation for a dry remark. "We should be flattered," he spoke up quietly, "that you'd risk your life, and the young lady's as well, on a boat that is no longer safe enough to entrust with your cargo!"

The old man whipped around toward him, and Jean Parmenter's wide eyes were on him too.

"I promise you," the old man snapped, "I wouldn't take your boat if there was any other available. Word just reached us on a northbound packet that Miss Parmenter's mother has been taken ill in Westport. We had no choice."

"I trust you'll have a smooth voyage," said York, and turned his back on the pair with small grace, leaving the captain to deal with them.

He was in sour mood as with bells ringing the boat reversed its engines, backed into midstream and then started southward down the current. He realized suddenly that part of this was due to an unwonted, nagging anxiety.

Somehow, the presence of Jean Parmenter on board altered the whole setup, increased his already strong uneasiness. Perhaps nothing untoward would happen on this trip, but on the other hand the ambush attempt back there in Nebraska Landing proved that Will Butler was impatient, was pushing ahead to be rid of his rival.

York Graydon could not feel complacence about this trip downriver. A strong premonition of disaster rode with him.

IV

PRODDED by it, he prowled the boat restlessly as it slipped easily down the current. With empty holds, sandbars and low water would give no trouble this time. On the main deck he found the ricks low of wood, and old Ben Avery sitting comfortably beside the portable mill, a swathe of white bandages across his thin chest. He was recovering well from the bullet that had wounded him. Nearby the oxen munched hay, piled on deck for them.

York told the old man, "We'll be pulling to shore at your old woodyard, in an hour or so, and sending out the oxen to haul in a big pile of stuff the crew cut and left here. Then you can start that saw working through it."

Old Avery nodded agreeably. He had a pipe in his mouth, the long-barreled rifle leaning against a bulkhead beside him. He reached a gnarled old hand, patted the shining blade of the saw.

"I'm gittin' right attached to this critter," he grunted. "Too bad my boys ain't here to see it. Sure beats thunder out of hewin' 'em out with a handax."

In the saloon York found air blue with tobacco smoke and the soldiers noisy in their roistering. He looked for the civilian passenger who had come aboard at Nebraska Landing, didn't find him. Uniformed men lined the bar, and there were boisterous card games going. Then, alone at a corner table, York spotted a thin, towheaded young private who sat hunched forward, staring at his bony hands. He had a sick look about him, and York saw his hands twitch nervously.

Something sent Graydon over to drop into the cushioned seat beside him. He said, pleasantly, "Aren't you drinking, friend? Or does the boat upset you a little?"

The youngster glanced at him quickly with tortured eyes. He seemed a year or so younger than York. Suddenly his lips were quivering and his bony fists clenched convulsively. All at once York knew the man was deathly afraid.

He wished he had said nothing. But now the kid was panting, "They send you back. They patch you up and send you back into that—living hell! How much do they think a man can take?"

The skin of his gaunt cheeks stretched in a spasm of horror, and sweat was in great beads across his bony forehead. Something made York say:

"You had two hours on shore, back there. You could have found a place to hide, surely. And there's bull trains pulling out every day, into the wilderness where no questions are ever asked."

The youngster lifted his head slowly, stared at him. "You mean—desert?" He shook his head, slowly. "You got to face it through. Because the worst is not knowing whether you'll be able to stand up to it the second time. A man can't run away from that." His thin face hardened suddenly, and York could read his thoughts as the youngster's glance took in this able-bodied man in civilian clothes. "Maybe you don't know what I'm talking about!"

There it is again, thought York, heavily. It was becoming constantly harder to endure. He felt an impulse to justify himself, to explain to this scared young man the circumstances that kept him out of uniform. But such excuses would be flippant and meaningless in the face of this young private's anguish of spirit.

So without answering he pushed to his feet, abruptly, went through the crowd toward the sunfilled doorway, frowning.

At the bar the loud voice of the sergeant was saying, "This danged guerrilla raider they call Jack Leech is the bucko I'd like to notch my sights on. He calls himself a Johnny Reb but he ain't on either side. He's just out to grab what he can."

"Heard his boys derailed a train of cars on the Hannibal and St. Joe last week," another put in. "And they hit a river boat along here somewhere, couple of months ago."

YORK lost their voices as he stepped out onto the deck. He was thinking, for the hundredth dark time: Why don't I give it up? It's a losing fight—why stick it out? Why not enlist when I reach St. Louis, get into uniform where I belong?

But then he remembered what the private had said: "You got to face it through!" It gave him strength and courage, suddenly, and a kind of patience. If that scared youngster could head back into the horror of battlefield. then York Graydon could carry on his own personal war to the last ditch fight.

The nation's bigger struggle could wait. It wasn't going to end tomorrow. There would be plenty of time yet for him to get into it. Meanwhile, this was his job to do.

While he was in the saloon, the boat had put to shore at Avery's burned out woodyard where the pile of logs lay on the bank ready to be hauled aboard. A

stage had been put out and the deckhands were taking the pair of oxen off with chains to do the job.

He saw Jean Parmenter at the rail, her bright hair a nimbus in the sunlight as she looked down at work on shore. Her head lifted then and she saw York Graydon; he thought she would turn her back on him, but instead she nodded hesitantly and something drew him across the deck to her side.

"Hello."

Graydon had never spoken to her before, never been alone with her or close enough to see that the brown of her eyes had flecks of golden light in them. But her nearness had a disturbing effect upon him now.

She said, "I'm afraid you weren't glad to see us come aboard your boat."

"I don't want anything to happen with you on deck, Miss Parmenter."

Jean Parmenter looked at him directly. "You think Will Butler cares that little for my safety?"

He pointed out, as bluntly, "Perhaps you forget. Butler isn't aware you're traveling with us. He left town this morning, and you didn't decide to come aboard until the last minute."

A brittle silence followed his words. The girl's hand lay on the railing between them, and the stab of sunlight from the diamond ring seemed to bring Will Butler into their presence—an intrusion that made this conversation doubly difficult.

She must have felt it, for she jerked her hand from the rail and then suddenly turned, moved away in the shadow of the deck. York hesitated for a moment, then went after her.

"Now that I've started, I'm going to finish saying this—though it means talking about a man behind his back, and I can't blame you for hating me. But it's for your own good, Miss Parmenter," he insisted, doggedly. She said nothing, did not look at him; but her step faltered. He plunged ahead:

"Before you—set the date with Butler, please try to think over just exactly how much you know about him. He came up to St. Louis at the outbreak of the war, and he brought two Mississippi sidewheelers with him. Where did he get them?"

She did stop now, whirled to face him, staring. "What are you saying?"

"Again, nothing I can prove. But I do know this: there never was any Will Butler operating a steamer line out of New Orleans before the war started. Moreover, this *River Queen* of his is an old luxury boat, the *Cotton Queen,* renamed. If you look closely, next time, you'll see where the new name has been painted in on her sides. My father knew her owner, personally, and there has been no word from the man since the confusion that followed the outbreak of the war."

Jean Parmenter's shoulders rose and fell under the tumult of her emotions. "Will must have bought the boat—"

"I sincerely hope he did," said York, bluntly.

SUDDENLY her hand came against his cheek in a blow that stung, and anger was ablaze in her eyes as she stepped back, the hand still raised.

"You cad!" she whispered, breathlessly. "Do you think I will listen to such insinuations about—about the man—"

The imprint of her hand was white against the sudden color that flushed his face. Woddenly he answered her:

"I knew you would be angry. But I had to say it, for your sake, and I know at least you aren't apt to forget! You'll at least think over what I've told you. That's all I ask!"

From the bank at which the *North Wind* rested the voices of the deckhands floated through the silence that engulfed them. The patient oxen had dragged a half of the felled timbers onto the deck and were returning down the gangplank for more.

"Down there," said York grimly, "are

the graves of two fine young men who were murdered at someone's orders to prevent the *North Wind* from meeting her schedules. The actual killing was done by a gang led by a man you may have heard of—Jack Leech. A dirty freebooting guerrilla, a blackhaired, broken-nosed scallawag."

His voice choked off. Ahead of them, the passenger from Nebraska Landing had stepped to the railing. He still clutched his carpetbag, and he was peering intently toward the brushy shore, as though searching for something there. Just then he glanced at York Graydon, and for the first time Graydon caught sight of his swarthy, battered features.

A name burst from York's lips in a choking cry. Hearing it Jack Leech whirled from the rail, hesitating for just an instant with fury in his narrow eyes. Suddenly he turned and started running.

Sight of the guerrilla leader on board the *North Wind* had been a numbing shock whose meaning held York Graydon paralyzed. He broke free of this and was digging for his gun as he lunged past the girl, starting after the fleeing man. But he had not gone a dozen yards when a sudden confusion of yells and gunfire broke out upon the bank below, halted him.

From nowhere, it seemed, men had sprung out of the brush—a motley bearded crowd, some wearing parts of castoff Confederate or Northern uniforms. There must have been thirty or more of them. Some were firing into the wood crew as the deckhands scattered for cover, pinning them down against the bank where one or two already lay dead under the first volley of fire. The rest of the guerrillas were storming up the gangplank, onto the lower deck, into the face of gunfire from the engine-room. The attackers were far too many to be held by that.

Yells had broke out upon the boat; boots were pounding the decks. York turned to the girl.

"Get to your cabin!" he ordered.

Jean stood there, swaying slightly, horror in her lovely face. The raiders would be storming up the ladder in a moment, heading for the pilot house. With a grunt of exasperation, York swooped and picked up the frightened girl, bodily, ran with her toward the rear of the boat.

Surprising, how light she seemed. The door of the cabin swung open as he reached it, and Harry Parmenter started out. York set the girl down, thrust her into the old man's arm.

"Take care of her!" he shouted, above the growing racket of gunfire. "And both of you keep under cover. It's the entire Leech gang, that wrecked the *Lexington.*"

Then he was hurrying forward, gun in hand, to meet the rush of the attackers up the ladder from below.

V

GRIMLY York shot at a yelling, bearded face and saw the man fall back against those behind him. But his place was taken immediately as the guerrillas swarmed onto the saloon deck, iron rungs of the ladder clattering under their boots as they stormed up to take over the river packet.

York fired until his gun was empty, then hurled himself flat against a bulkhead out of the storm of bullets that came at him. Frantically he groped in his pocket for gelatine covered cartridges and percussion caps. Dan Mitchell, hurrying down from the hurricane just then, took a slug squarely and York saw him tumble down the ladder, losing his visored cap. The sight turned York Graydon a little sick inside.

A good man, Captain Dan Mitchell, even if he did have more than a little contempt for the younger Graydon. . . .

York got the last shell rammed home and the final cap in place, then came lunging up to his feet as the deck fair-

ly flooded with the attackers. He thumbed the hammer as he dived forward, recklessly. One of them loomed before him, so close he could see the flaring, bloodshot eyes and catch the sour stench of whisky. He swung with the barrel of his gun, felt it smash bone and saw the man fall.

A slug scorched by him, the gun smashing almost in his ear. He whirled to face a big redhead in a Confederate cavalryman's forage cap—stolen headgear—that was two sizes too small. The smoking muzzle was on him for another shot and York tried desperately, hopelessly, to get his own gun up. He knew he would never make it. Then a falling body lurched against the redhead, ruining his aim. The bullet skewered harmlessly into trampled decktimbers. York's left fist arched quickly, smashed against the bridge of the man's nose and the redhead dropped.

Side-stepping, York Graydon looked ahead and saw an amazing sight.

The raiders had run headon into a tide of blue uniformed men, who came pouring out of the bar. The big sergeant was leading them, yelling wild oaths as he laid into the guerrillas. Only a few of the soldiers had guns available but the rest had their fists and some had grabbed bottles, chairs, bung starters and came wading in with those, and with the zest of fighters long out of battle.

York dropped a guerrilla just as he was about to put a bullet into the big sergeant. Then the groups joined in a medley of yells and gunfire and thudding fists. For a moment there was only wild and swirling confusion but then it became apparent that these were odds greater than the raiders had expected to buck, and greater than they could stand against.

The blue tide pressed forward, as the guerrillas gave way to it slowly. His gun empty, York waded ahead through acrid powdersmoke, flailing with the empty weapon, trying to avoid the fallen bodies of the attackers underfoot.

There was a splash far below, then another.

Pressed back against the *North Wind's* ornate railing, the guerrillas were breaking, suddenly, and tearing free of their opponents to hurl themselves overboard. Some hit with great force in the shallow water and stayed there. Others managed to stagger up and scramble, drenched and staggering, up the bank. All at once it was a raid no longer, but, thanks to the unexpected intervention of the troops, a badly turned rout.

Later as he mopped sweat and blood from his face, York saw the grinning face of the sergeant who had led them.

"Good fightin' bucko!" the non-com yelled at him, and his eyes held no contempt.

Then York sighted another face he knew, a towheaded private who only a half hour ago had sat alone at a table in the saloon and trembled with fear. He was trembling no longer, though his tunic was half ripped from him and one bony hand that swung a broken chair leg had a bloody bullet scratch across it. Instead, the youngster's head was up, his eyes shining—and he was laughing aloud, with newfound confidence in his own strength and courage.

He's licked his problem, York Graydon thought grimly. Maybe there's hope for me.

AT THAT moment, turning toward the ladder leading to the main deck, he glimpsed a familiar pair of shoulders disappearing down it.

York forgot his gun was empty. He forgot everything but the need to stop the other man. He ran for the ladder, hit the bloody top rung of it just as his man was heading for the door of the engine-room. Everything was strangely quiet, there on the main deck.

York's voice cracked sharply as he called: *"Leech!"*

Jack Leech turned. He had a gun in one hand, the carpetbag in the other. His gun came up and fired, just as York snapped trigger on a spent cartridge.

A heavy blow hit York in the shoulder. He slammed against the bulkhead and crumpled there on the ladder, dizziness in him. The battered features of the guerrilla leader were twisted in a snarl and he made ready to shoot again.

Then the look flattened out to baffled surprise. He took one step, stumbled, fell headlong, and old Ben Avery came limping with the long barreled flintlock smoking in his grip, a look of savage triumph on his face.

"That settles for my two boys!" he snarled.

Weak and sick, York got to his feet and stumbled down the ladder, over the body of one of the raiders that had fallen there. Leech was dead. But York Graydon picked up the carpetbag that the man had guarded so carefully. He opened it, shook out a piece of cordwood.

Old Avery stared at him. "What's it mean?"

York frowned at the stick, not comprehending. He turned it over, looked at the ends. Then he saw the fuse, and the plug. He pried them out, and from the carefully hollowed interior poured black powder into the palm of his hand.

"Good gosh!" the old woodhawk gasped. "If that went on the fire, it could've blown the bottom out of the boat!"

"Explains the fate of the *Lucy Belle,*" said York, grimly. "Slipped in with the stacked wood, the man who planted it there would have plenty of time to leave the boat before the explosion.

"Probably Butler didn't want to use the same idea twice if he could help it, but Leech came prepared. He was working in Butler's pay, of course. They knew we would be stopping here for that wood we had cut, so they watched for us, Leech shipping with the boat to cover this end of things. He didn't know there was anyone aboard that knew him, by sight or description.

"When he saw the soldiers he tried to signal his men to hold off. But I interrupted him and they came ahead. That's one guerrilla gang that's busted wide open now!"

Old Avery asked, "And how about that Butler crook? Does he get off scot free again?"

York Graydon was staring thoughtfully toward the bank, and the trees and brush that crowned it. "You know," he said slowly, "I have an idea Butler's up there somewhere, waiting to see if Leech gets the job done with his powder!"

Then he was running down the gangplank to the shore, groping for the last of the spare shells in his pocket as he went. Behind him he heard old Avery's alarmed voice:

"Son, you look out! You'll walk right into a bullet!"

Ramming cartridges into his gun and placing caps, he hurried on, up the mud bank, past the wood crew and the oxen. Two men were dead here, two more to tally in the score of Butler's crimes. York's shoulder throbbed and it was bleeding, but he could still use a gun.

He went straight toward the greenery that crowned the low bluff, leaning forward now against the steep pitch as he climbed, peering ahead, searching that screen of leaves and branches.

THE last survivor of Leech's gang had long since scattered. Likely Will Butler had made his escape too. Once again, he realized with deadening futility, there would be nothing to show for this—no "proof" of the man's guilt. Nothing to prevent another attempt against the Graydon Lines which could prove the final and fatal one. A great discouragement filled York's tired and aching body.

Then, only yards to his left, there was a stirring in the cottonwood branches at the top of the bluff. Swiv-

eling in that direction York had a glimpse of a mount tethered there and at the same moment Will Butler stepped into view.

Sardonic amusement twisted the hard mouth beneath its clipped mustache. The gun was level in the man's lean fingers.

"Right here, greenhorn!" he said. "And coming right in to get it, aren't you?"

York twisted, trying without much hope to bring his gun around in time to beat that point-blank aim. His thoughts were a blur, centering on Butler's mocking, handsome face. He was dimly aware that, even as he snapped the hammer, his heel slipped and he was spilling down, hard, against the muddy slope. Then the weapon bucked against his palm, against his hurt shoulder.

* * * * *

"It was Butler?" asked Harry Parmenter, sharply.

York Graydon nodded. "I stumbled and he missed his first shot at me. Mine was luckier." Graydon didn't want to talk. He felt sick, drained of strength. It had seemed to take forever, getting back to the boat. He couldn't even remember clearly climbing the ladder here to his cabin.

The Army doctor, tearing away the shoulder of his bloodsoaked coat and shirt, muttered something about fools for luck. York winced a couple of times under the prodding of his steel-hard fingers. He had asked about the soldiers who had pitched in to drive off Leech's gang. There were some busted heads, a bullet wound or two, but nothing serious. Graydon was tremendously relieved to hear it.

It was also good to see Dan Mitchell on his feet. One of the captain's arms was out of commission for the time being, but he was able to take command again of the *North Wind*. York, looking at the solid, stubborn face of the boat captain, saw the mark of the blow he had thrown the man yesterday.

He said, bluntly: "I'm sorry about hitting you, Dan."

The man colored a little. "I'm sorry I talked the way I did," he grunted. "I deserved to get hit. You're all man, Graydon. I'm—proud to work for you."

His broad, homely face split in a slow grin. York's tired smile answered him. He said, "I'll shake with you on that. When we're both mended a little better, I'll lift a drink with you, in the bar!"

"Good enough!"

The door closed behind the captain's broad back. York sat on the edge of the bunk, feeling the throb of the engines in the deck beneath his feet as the boat slipped downstream. There was silence while the doctor did his work. Then Harry Parmenter cleared his throat noisily.

"I reckon I owe some apologies, too. Everything you said about Butler turned out to be right. I was too blind to see it."

"You're not to blame," York Graydon said. "The man covered up too well and talked too easy. He—" Graydon looked briefly from the old man to the pretty girl beside him, and looked away again. He swallowed. "I'm sorry Jean, it had to be me that—"

Her hand was on his arm, quickly. "Don't say that," she begged earnestly. "There's no reason to blame yourself. Thank you for showing me the truth—in time!"

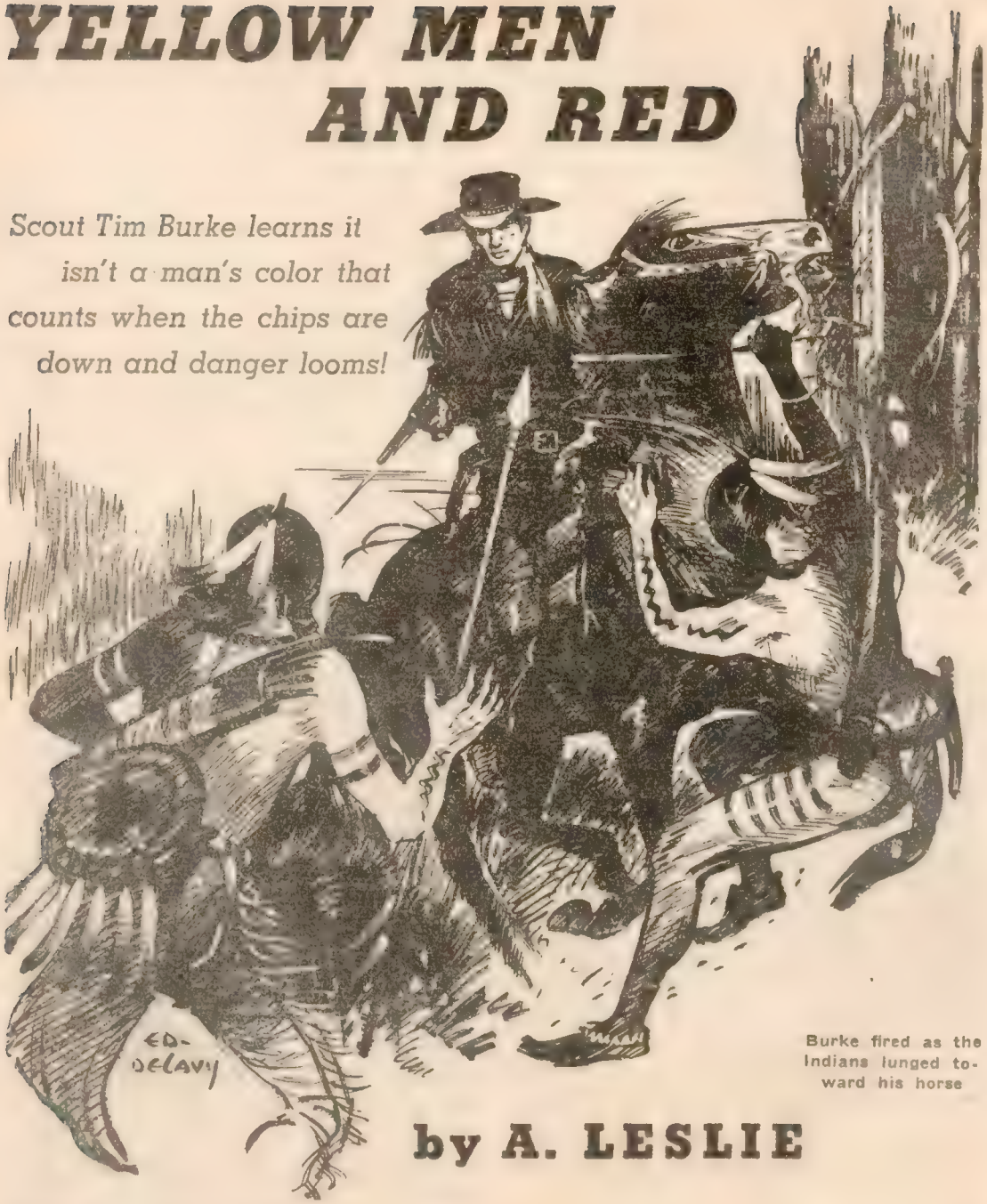
York looked at the hand. It was her left, and he realized suddenly that the diamond ring was missing. She had already torn it off, maybe thrown it overboard into the swirling, muddy River.

He lifted his head quickly. In her eyes he saw there were no tears, no regrets—only friendliness as her lovely, gold-flecked glance met his own.

Somewhere he found the courage to put his own hand on the one that touched his arm. She let it remain there. A small thing, that meeting of fingers, but it held its promise.

YELLOW MEN AND RED

Scout Tim Burke learns it isn't a man's color that counts when the chips are down and danger looms!



Burke fired as the Indians lunged toward his horse

by A. LESLIE

TIM BURKE scowled angrily as he gazed at the construction gang.

"I can't help it, Steve, I don't like them yaller coolies," he said.

His Irish-gray eyes flashed resentful at the busy workers strung along the grade. What did it matter that it was chiefly due to Chinese labor that the Central Pacific had crossed California and Nevada and was pushing its fingers of steel over the mountains and deserts of Utah? What if the little yellow men were giving the Irish of the Union Pacific the hottest of fights in the two-way race across the continent. Tim Burke, the scout, just didn't like Chi-

nese, and that's all there was to it.

With Steve Rafferty, the general construction foreman, it was different. Steve, folks said, liked everybody, so long as they gave him half a chance to like them. Steve had kindly, dreamy blue eyes. His voice was soft, almost womanly, in its gentleness, but there was a note in his quiet accents, for all their musical quality, that rendered that voice not unfitting to Steve's six-foot-four of spring steel and rawhide. Folks respected Steve Rafferty, even those who had not been privileged to see him in action, a raging giant in the forefront of a ruckus, with the strength of a grizzly and the elusive quickness of a mountain lion.

Tim Burke liked and admired Rafferty. Usually he listened to his advice, and followed it. But in this particular matter, Burke, impulsive, stubborn, generous, was obdurate. He didn't like Chinese, and he said so. Now, while the late afternoon sunshine flooded the mountains and the deserts with liquid gold and the winey air was vibrant with the hushed beauty of awakening spring, the argument was going strong.

"You're all wrong, Tim," Rafferty said. "This is America, Tim, where all men are free, where equal opportunity is offered to all. Would you deny that to men because their skin is yellow? They're fellow-men, Tim. We just finished fightin' a war that was fought so men might be free—men whose skins are black. I got some scars to show for that fight, Tim, and so have you. You and me came to this country, Tim, for the same reasons—we wanted to be free. We wanted to have a chance. We got both. Ain't right to deny them things to anybody, Tim. If we try to hug them things to ourselves, we won't have 'em long."

BURKE growled in his throat, shifted his moccasined feet. It wasn't easy for the freedom-loving young Irishman to argue that point.

"They're good men, even if their skins ain't as white, Tim," Rafferty went on. "Take that young feller over there, Mo Ti. There's a man, no matter if his skin is yaller." He gestured to where a lithe little yellow man was busy superintending the careful setting of a switch stand.

"As good a gang foreman as I ever saw in nigh forty years of railroadin'," Rafferty said.

"Mo Ti don't wear a pigtail, does he," Burke remarked irrelevantly.

"Nope, he cuts his hair short," Rafferty replied. "I don't know why. Never could get much out of him about himself. Just smiles and shrugs and pretends not to understand, if he don't feel like understandin'! When he wants to, he talks mighty nigh as good English as you and me. Only he ain't got the brogue. I'll teach him that, if he stays on with me," Rafferty added with a chuckle. "He's a real lad, Tim, one even the Ould Sod could be proud of. I've seen him whip men twice as big as him and not seem to exert himself."

"Iggerant haythen!" grunted Burke.

Rafferty's eyes grew dreamier. "I've always contended," he said, "that bein' a haythen or not bein' depends on how a man acts and lives. I've knowed some mighty prime haythens who went to Mass every mornin'."

Burke cuffed his coonskin cap over one eye. He had an uneasy feelin' that he wasn't gettin' anywhere in the argument. Rafferty was a hard man to argue with.

"Just the same I don't never want to have anythin' to do with 'em," he growled.

Rafferty smiled. In his fifty-odd years of turbulent existence, he had seen men drastically alter their opinions.

"Never's a long time, Tim," he said.

Which ended a conversation that had already continued too long.

Burke glanced up at the serries of lofty benches towering over the grade,

to the north.

"Steve," he said, "I've a notion I'll be afther ridin' up on that hill. Can get a good look to the south, across the level ground, for a long ways. There's Injuns down to the south, Steve, no doubt about it. The Captain figgers they might try somethin' against us from down there. Them thickets make fine cover for the red devils. He's got the soldiers lined up to keep close watch, but if they'd happen to snuk up on us they'd do damage. The Captain looks sort of worried."

He gestured to the blue-clad cavalryman sitting his horse a few hundred yards to the south of the right-of-way, his eyes fixed on the bristle of growth which covered the rolling land that stretched to the ragged curve of the horizon.

"A good idea," agreed Rafferty. "But be careful, lad, them devils are crafty. They might snuk around and jump you."

"Faith, and I reckon I can take care of that," Burke replied contemptuously. "I know their ways. I wasn't a scout with Fremont and Al Sieber for nothin'."

With a wave of his hand to the Cavalry Captain who commanded the soldier guard, he strode to his waiting horse, the fringes of his buckskins fluttering in the wind. He mounted and rode east where a trail, possible for a horseman to negotiate, led up the terraces of the hills. Though nominally under the Captain's authority, the scout was very much of a free lance and ordered his goings and comings largely to suit himself. More than an hour passed before Rafferty saw him reappear on the lip of the topmost bench, a toy man on a toy horse, gazing resentfully toward the ant-like Chinese toiling far below him.

If Burke had not been so intent on his pet obsession, the grade building Chinese, what occurred a moment later might not have happened. A slight rustling in the thick growth jerked his head around, an instant too late. He whipped his Walker Colt from its sheath and fired twice at the rushing figures, downing two of the Indians, one dead, the other severely wounded. Then a war club crashed against his skull and he slumped to the ground.

THE workers and the soldiers below heard the shots and witnessed the last act of the tragedy they were powerless to prevent. The cursing troopers blazed away ineffectual shots at the hilltop as the triumphant red men vanished into the brush with their captive. Steve Rafferty raised a shaking hand and wiped away the sweat that suddenly spotted his face, although the day was cool.

"There's the end of Tim, poor lad," he said, his voice thick with sorrow.

"Yes," growled the cavalry captain, with a bitter oath. "I only hope they killed him, but I reckon they didn't; otherwise they would have left him lying where he fell. He'd be a sight better off dead than in their hands alive." He glanced at the westering sun, shook his head.

"Nothing we can do," he said. "They'll travel fast, and my men are no good at forest tracking. I'll send a man to the fort for another scout. We'll set off first thing in the morning to find Tim, or rather what will be left of him, which won't be much."

"No, not much," Rafferty returned heavily. "And what there is won't be nice to look upon. Poor lad! And him just a boy! Eh, what you want, Mo Ti?" He turned to glance down at the little Chinese, who was plucking at his sleeve.

Mo Ti never wasted words. "Me get scout," he said.

"Huh!" exclaimed Rafferty. "What you talkin' about, little feller?"

"Me get scout," Mo Ti repeated. "Bring back. Indians no kill yet. Wait till dark. Feast and dance first. Then torture."

Rafferty shook his head. "You couldn't do it, little feller," he replied. "Them red devils know the woods. They'll travel fast, and they won't leave no trail anybody but an experienced scout could follow. You'd just get yourself losted. No chore for a city bred man."

Mo Ti's lips twitched slightly in what was probably intended for a smile. "Not city man, me," he said. "Me from north China—what you call Mongolia. Mountains there, deserts, woods. Me born in hills, brought up in woods. Kill tiger with arrows. Fight Buriats. Buriats like Indian, only worse. Buriats smarter, shoot better. Indian dumb, 'fraid of what can't see. Mo Ti bring scout back."

The cavalry captain spoke. "Rafferty," he said, "let him go. Maybe he can do something. I know something about the country he speaks of—Mongolia. It's what he says it is. And the Buriats are fierce nomadic tribes of Siberia and Mongolia. They are something like our Indians. And a Siberian tiger is something to go up against with a bow and arrows."

Rafferty nodded. "Just as you say, sor," he replied. "All right, Mo Ti. See what you can do."

Mo Ti jerked his head sideways. "Go camp car. Back," he said, and pattered off. In a few minutes he returned. He was stripped to the waist, garbed only in buckskin britches, cut off at the knee, and hempen sandals. A bulging pouch swung from his girdle. The horn handle of a knife protruded above his waistband.

"Want a gun?" the cavalryman asked.

Mo Ti shook his head. "Gun in way, make noise," he replied. "No know much about gun. Got knife." He drew the razor-edged blade as he spoke. Rafferty gave a low whistle.

"The Saints knows it's big enough!" he declared. "Looks more like a Scotsman's two-handed claymore than anythin' else I recall seein'."

Mo Ti turned toward the beetling benches that climbed upward like giant steps. Muscles like coiling snakes rippeld under his golden skin as he moved.

His slightly narrow eyes were as bits of polished obsidian.

"Me go," he said, and suited the action to the word.

"Whe-e-ew, he's headin' straight up the cliffs!" exclaimed Rafferty.

"Look at him climb those rocks!" added the Captain. "I believe the fellow is part cat."

More than once the two watchers held their breath as the little Chinese, clinging with fingers and toes to tiny ledges and cracks in the jagged rock wall, swiftly made his way up the beetling cliffs. They heaved simultaneous sighs of relief as he at last topped the crest, paused for a moment, the rays of the setting sun glinting on the golden skin of his naked back and shoulders, and disappeared into the growth.

SLOWLY the sun vanished behind the western crags. The dusk quickly deepened to full dark. From the shadowy hills sounded the hauntingly beautiful plaint of a hunting wolf. An owl, perched on the topmost branch of a blasted oak, answered with a querulous whine. The lights of the railroad camp winked reflection to the stars bursting through the blue-black arch of the sky. Rafferty and the captain ate their evening meal in silence. Neither had much appetite.

Far back in the hills, where the fires cast back a glare on the wall of growth hemming a little clearing, Tim Burke stood bound to the trunk of a tree, a dull gray ache pounding away in his bruised head, cold despair winding its clammy folds about his heart.

Beside the fires, his captors feasted mightily on the flesh of a slain deer. They washed down the meat with deep draughts from a keg of whisky stolen

from some wagon train. Soon they began to chant in harsh gutturals, and to leap and pirouette around the fires. They were working themselves into a blood frenzy.

Burke, rigid against the tree trunk, the firelight flickering redly on his white face, watched them, a cold sweat beading his temples. Burke was not afraid to die, but he was afraid of the horror he knew awaited him.

Burke had seen blood-drenched captives, rescued too late, raising eyeless sockets to heaven. He recalled the time he stood before a torture post, after the Indians had been routed, and wondered numbly how a disembowelled man could live so long. Just a little more of their leaping and yowling and they would come for him, to begin the long hours of agony that would be prolonged throughout the night by experts in torture who knew how to get the last awful pang from a victim and still leave the flame of life flickering.

With Irish imagination, he pictured his own writhing, mangled form, heard his own terrible screams ringing in his ears. He set his teeth and prayed for courage. He did not pray for rescue, for he knew that was futile. The soldiers would take up the pursuit on the morrow, but they would be too late. He knew well they would not attempt it during the night. They would be helpless as children in the hours of darkness, not knowing which way to turn, unable to follow the carefully covered trail of the forest bred Red Men. They would find his mutilated body, perhaps, but that was all.

The victory dance quickened. The chant quickened, grew louder, shrilled to unearthly screechings. Burke's flesh crawled, the hair prickled on his scalp. He stared with dilated eyes at the bounding, whirling figures. His tree was some distance back from the fires, on the edge of the flanking growth, but under the watchful eyes of his captors.

Dimly, almost subconsciously, so intent were his fear-fascinated senses on the unearthly scene before him, he became aware of a small, persistent sound behind him—a sibilant hissing repeated over and over. Vaguely he wondered if an angry rattlesnake might be coiled within striking distance. Burke hated snakes, but right now he hoped it was a big one and had him in mind.

Death by snake poison—anything—would be better than what was in store for him before the night was over. He turned his head slightly, trying to catch a glimpse of the reptile. He saw something yellowish move in the brush a few feet distant. Abruptly he realized, with a heart-stopping thrill, that it was not the mottled body of a rattlesnake, but a human arm. As he gulped, a voice reached his ears, a voice the speaker cunningly contrived to resemble the drone of a night beetle.

"Scout," it burred, barely audible, "when cut ropes, run. Run in bushes. Don't stop. Run fast."

Burke craned his neck a little more. He saw a face, a golden-hued face in which gleamed slanting black eyes. He gulped again as he recognized the owner.

"Mo Ti!" he croaked. "Where did you come from! You can't do it, feller, just get yourself killed. Injuns see you."

"Indians have something else to think about," Mo Ti breathed. "Wait!"

The face vanished. There was the faintest of rustlings, then silence save for the whoops of the dancing Indians.

Burke waited, his body clammy with cold sweat, striving vainly to still the chattering of his teeth induced by the intolerable suspense. Any minute now the Indians would turn to him. Already they were mad with blood lust.

Again the sibilant hissing. "Ready!" breathed Mo Ti. "Run fast!"

BURKE tensed. What in the name of all the Saints did the little yellow man plan to do? He could never hope to appear in the open and cut the

ropes under the very eyes of the Indians.

Bang! Burke jumped in his bonds. The Indians jumped also, their whoops turning to yells of alarm. *Bang*! *Bang*! *Bang*! A whole volley of reports crackled from the growth on the opposite side of the clearing. With howls the Indians fled this way and that, seeking cover.

Burke dimly wondered why none of them fell under the fusillade that continued from the brush. Then Mo Ti was by his side, his knife slashing and hacking. The cords that held Burke prisoner fell away. Mo Ti gripped his shoulder, whirled him about. Burke stumbled on numb legs.

From beyond the fire sounded a shrill whoop. One of the fleeing Indians had sighted the rescue. He came bounding across the clearing, gigantic in the firelight, towering over the little Chinese, who crouched motionless.

Stumbling for the brush, Burke saw, from the corner of his eye, what happened. He saw the Indian leap, whirling his hatchet aloft. He saw Mo Ti streak forward to meet him, saw the flame-like-sweep of the great knife.

The Red Man reeled back with a gasping squall, blood gushing from the ghastly wound that ripped his abdomen from side to side. Mo Ti whirled like a flicker of yellow light. He was beside Burke in a single panther-like bound. Fingers like rods of steel gripped Burke's wrist, dragging him stumbling into the growth. At top speed, Mo Ti ran him along. Burke's legs got some feeling back into them, his stride steadied. Behind sounded whoops and yells. The firing had ceased.

"They're comin', feller," Burke gasped. "Catch us in a minute."

"Not follow where we go," hissed Mo Ti. "Run!"

Burke ran, his temples pounding, the breath panting in his throat, his lungs threatening to burst his ribs. Behind them the yells sounded louder, and the pad of swift feet.

Abruptly Burke rocked back on his heels. Directly in front was empty space. Far down in the depths of a dark canyon whose sheer wall was at their very feet, he could see starlight gleaming on tossing water.

"Jump!" barked Mo Ti.

"Feller," gasped Burke, "I can't swim."

"No matter—jump!" A hard shove emphasized the command.

Setting his teeth, Burke jumped. The wind screened in his ears as he flashed downward. It tore the breath from his lips, blinded his eyes. He hit the water feet first, with a tremendous splash. Mo Ti plunged into the stream at almost the same instant.

Burke gulped under the bite of the icy water, strangled, had just enough sense left to set his teeth and clamp a hand over his nose. Down he went, down, down, down, as if he would never stop. Then slowly, slowly he began to rise. There was a mighty roaring in his ears, red flashes before his eyes. His heart pounded spasmodically in the agony of suffocation.

A hand gripped his collar, and he was hauled to the surface. He gulped a great draught of life-giving air that burned his tortured lungs like searing flame. Far above, through the roaring in his ears, he could hear yells of baffled fury.

Then the current gripped him and hurled him downstream. He went under again, and again was hauled to the surface. He struggled violently. Mo Ti's palm slammed against his face. He saw stars and flashes, but the hard slap jolted him to his senses.

"Hands on shoulders — hands on shoulders!" the yellow man was chattering. "No fight! Keep still!"

His head clearing somewhat, Burke obeyed. Mo Ti swam like an otter, going with the current, diagonaling slowly toward the south bank of the stream, where a narrow stretch of

beach gleamed in the starlight.

But it was a long, hard pull. Burke could feel the strokes of his companion growing feebler. His own body was numb with cold. A deadly lethargy was crawling over him. Mo Ti's clean strokes were beginning to splash. Burke could hear the labored gasps of his breathing.

"Let me go, feller," he mumbled. "You've done enough. You'll get yourself drowned."

"No talk!" panted Mo Ti. "Make shore soon!"

A FEW moments of desperate battling. Burke suddenly felt his feet drag against the bottom. At the same instant Mo Ti went under, struggling feebly. The taller Burke surged erect in water that came to his armpits. He gripped Mo Ti's arm and drove for the bank. A mighty effort, with the current thrashing at his body and threatening to throw him off his feet, then a churning through the shallows, with Mo Ti dragging behind him. Another moment and Burke staggered up the shelving bank. Together they fell to the ground, to lie moaning and gasping in utter exhaustion. It was not long before both recovered, however. They sat up, shivering with cold.

"Got to move," Burke mumbled, taking the initiative. He was in a little better shape than his companion, for he had taken small part in the exhausting battle with the current. "Got to move, feller, or we'll freeze."

He helped Mo Ti to his feet and they started down the canyon, reeling and staggering like drunken men. But as the exercise sent the blood coursing through their veins, their numbed bodies limbered up a bit. Soon they were making fair progress.

"Feller," Burke asked suddenly, "what became of the men who were doin' the shootin' up there?"

"No shootin'," replied Mo Ti, his teeth suddenly flashing white in the starlight.

"No shootin'!"

"No shootin'. Firecrackers!"

"Firecrackers?" Burke repeated. "What in the—"

"Next week Chinese New Year," Mo Ti explained. "Chinese always shoot firecrackers on New Year—frighten devils away. Send to San Francisco for firecrackers. Lot come yesterday. Mo Ti bring some along when come look for you. Firecrackers make big bang noise, like gun. Indians dumb, not know difference. Think lots of guns shoot. Run like deer."

Burke breathed deeply. "Chinese shoot 'em to scare devils, eh?" he said. "Well, feller, they sure scare devils all right. They scared a prime lot of 'em tonight!"

Dawn was breaking when rescuer and rescued at last staggered into the camp, weary almost to unconsciousness, their teeth chattering with cold. Steve Rafferty, who, in company with the cavalry captain, had spent a night of sleepless watching, went to work on them with warm blankets, hot soup and hot coffee. He soon worked the chill out of their bones and got them to sleep in his own quarters.

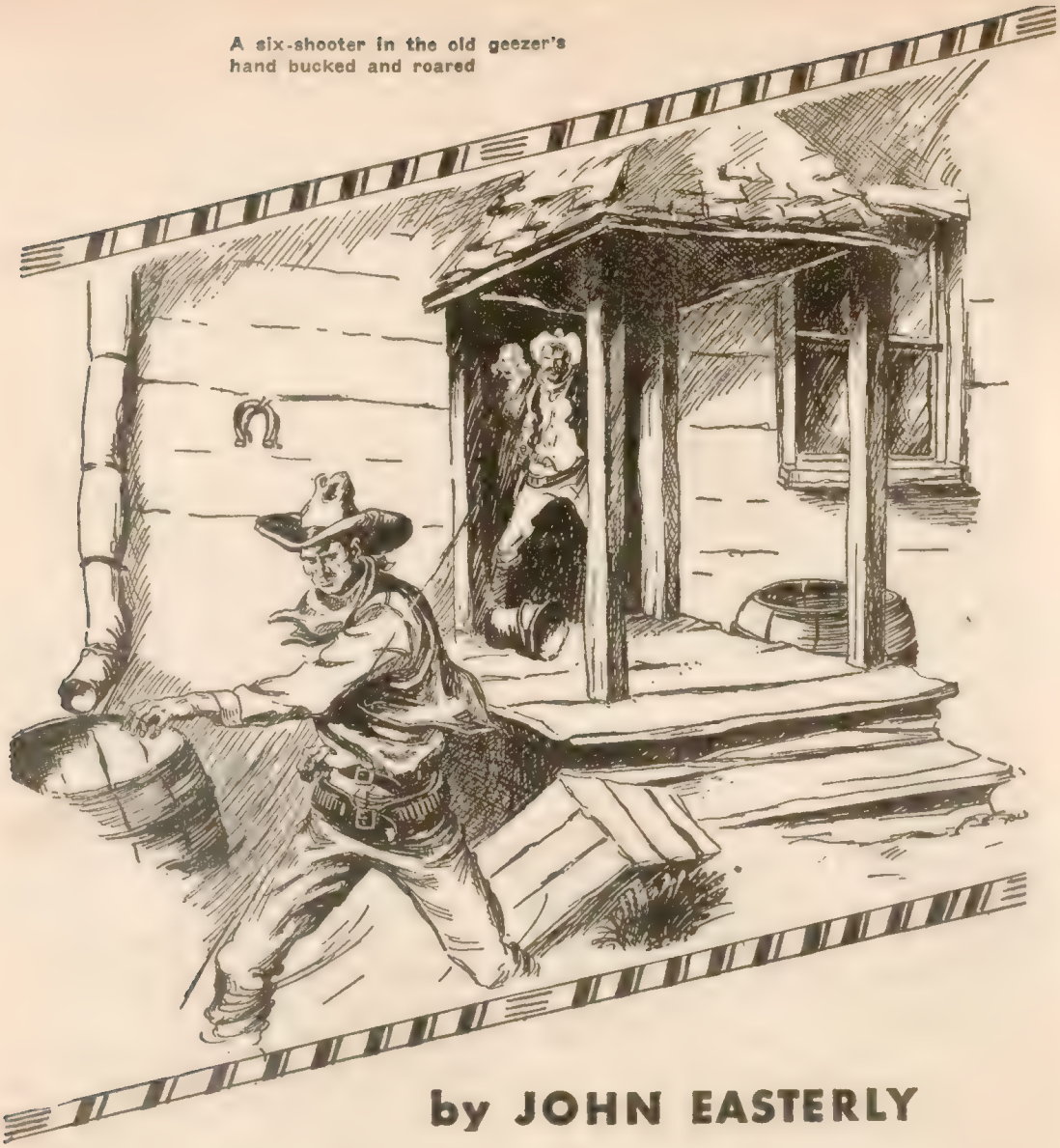
Mo Ti awakened first. He grinned shyly under the praise showered on him by Rafferty and the captain, cleaned the heaping plate Rafferty set before him with his own hands, and departed for the camp cars. Burke woke up some time later. He regaled Rafferty and the captain with a vivid account of his rescue. It was dark when he finished and raining hard. After eating, and smoking a pipe, Burke, to Rafferty's surprise, slipped on his buffalo skin coat. "Where you be afther goin', Tim, on a night like this?" he asked.

"Where am I afther goin'?" Burke repeated, pausing at the door. "I'm afther goin' down to the camp for a game of fan-tan with me friends, the Chinese!"

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A "FAST" BRAND AND A "SLOW" BRAND ?
1
WHO WAS THE DESPERADO WHO ONCE SAVED BAT MASTERSON'S LIFE ?
2
WHAT WAS A MOUNTAIN MAN?
3
WHAT WAS A MULE-SKINNER'S JOB ?
4
WHO KEPT 9,000 FEDERAL TROOPS IN ACTION AGAINST HIM FOR THREE YEARS ?
5

The Answers are on Page 193—if you MUST look!



A six-shooter in the old geezer's hand bucked and roared

by JOHN EASTERLY

all is not gold....

IF THERE ever was an unpopularity contest at Alkali Flats, Tom Gale would have won it hands down. He was the meanest hombre in four counties. He would sooner kick a dog than pat him and he liked humans just a little bit less than he liked dogs.

He'd had fights with everybody in the Flats, but being big and rough and tough besides being poison mean, he'd never taken a licking and most folks were afraid of him, in addition to hating him.

But what brought things to a head was when the yellow haired singer came to work in the Lucky Chance Saloon.

"I expect it to raise the level of the establishment," Jimmy Leverett told us.

TOUGH TOM GALE STAKES A CLAIM ON A LADY'S SHINING TRESSES

"Miss Blake is a lady and from now on you cowboys will behave in here and cut down on the profanity that is hurting my ears."

Jimmy Leverett was from Boston, a pale and rather skinny little fellow, nice looking if you like that far-away intellectual type and very gentle. How he come to run a saloon I never did know, but most of us liked him. Not Tom Gale, of course. Tom and he had a run in pronto and, small as Jimmy was, he was set to wade in on Tom and take the licking of his life when a lot of us stopped it. From there on he and Tom Gale treated each other like a couple of strange bulls, standing off and sniffing suspicious, but Gale didn't stop coming into Leverett's place. He was never one to miss a chance to strut.

Lottie Blake, the singer, arrived on the Tuesday stage and every man in Alkali Flats had an errand to do around the stage depot that day. She got off and a big old geezer looking like her pa lugged a lot of carpet-bags off the stage for her. All the boys took one look at that yellow hair and those red lips and they were gone.

Jimmy Leverett bustled up and introduced himself and then he turned and presented her to the bunch, not that he expected her to remember their names, but just by way of being polite.

All the boys just pulled off their hats and shuffled their feet, but not Tom Gale. He stepped right up and took her hand and held it about three minutes longer than he should.

"I'm right pleased to meet you, ma'am," he said, turning on the charm, "and I hope to see you right often."

"Thanks," said Lottie, pulling her hand free.

Tom Gale turned and gave us all a look, with triumph shining out of his mean eyes. Then he strutted off. And there wasn't a man there who didn't feel that trouble was heading our way.

JIMMY had rented the old Brown house for Lottie and her pa and they moved right in and got settled. She sang that night in the Lucky Chance, dressed in an evening gown with some kind of spangles on it that flashed in the light, her hair down on her shoulders and shining like gold. I reckon there wasn't a man in the place heard a note she sang, they was all so busy staring.

When she was gone, the boys clapped like mad. They were all slicked up and shining, hair combed, faces washed, clean shirts and all the fixings. Jimmy Leverett was right enough when he said there'd be changes.

Then big Tom Gale got to his feet. He looked around the room, his mouth twitching in a sardonic sort of smile.

"I see," he said, "a lot of you forty-a-month cow hands slicked up here like hymn singers. If any of you saddle pounders have got any idear of callin' on Lottie Blake, you can forget it right now."

A silence that was solid enough to cut settled down on the room. Tom Gale hitched up his gun belt and grinned, right mean.

"I'm callin' on the little lady myself," he announced, "and I got my own way of dealin' with competition. Do I catch any of you gents so much as passin' the old Brown house, I'll break yore backs with my hands."

He glared around. Nobody in the room would meet his eye. Over behind the bar, Jimmy Leverett, kind of paler than usual, was looking hard at him, but Tom didn't even count him in this. He was just a tenderfoot, and couldn't be classed as competition.

"I'm callin' on her tomorrow evenin'," Tom said, and with that he turned and stalked out.

Everybody there felt ashamed, but a bully has that awful advantage, that once he gets the jump, it's powerful hard to make the first move toward breaking it. And nobody said a word.

Only Jimmy Leverett, staring at nothing, smiled a little.

Next day, just around dusk, Tom Gale came riding in to do his courting. He went past the Lucky Chance and, at a safe distance, the whole bunch trickled through the door and followed. He looked back once over his shoulder and his teeth flashed, but he didn't make any move to chase them. He was the kind that enjoyed an audience and he wanted them there so he could strut some more.

At the Brown house, he got down off his horse, tied him to the breeze and tromped up on the tiny porch. The boys hung back in the road, spreading out in a sort of half circle and straining their eyes and ears.

It was light yet in the west, but the shadows were beginning to fall and inside the house it was dark except for one yellow light shining through the window. Tom Gale's knuckles made a noise on the door.

After a little while it opened. The big old geezer stood in the doorway.

"Howdy," Tom Gale said.

"Yeh?"

"I'm callin' on Miss Blake."

"You what!"

There was a roar from the old geezer and a blur of movement on the porch that was too fast for the boys to make out. Somebody shouted something and then Tom Gale made a flying leap off that porch just missing a rain barrel, and ran for his life. And behind him a six-shooter in the old geezer's hand bucked and roared and sent hot lead hissing all over the yard.

Out front the boys scattered like quail. Tom Gale was running so fast he clean forgot about his horse.

"Fly for your lives!" he yelled. "That old walrus ain't her pa—he's her husband!"

And with that all of Alkali Flats broke in a mad dash for safety. They wound up at the Lucky Chance eventually, all but Tom Gale. He kept traveling, right straight out to his ranch.

He never did come to Alkali Flats much after that. Did his buying over in Soda Gulch. Especially after the joke that had been played on him got around.

HE THOUGHT there was something up when we got back to the Lucky Chance and found Jimmy Leverett there, wiping glasses and smiling to himself.

"I heard shots," he said. "No one was hurt, I trust?"

"Darn near!" he was told. "Tom Gale almost got perforated by the gal's husband!"

Jimmy smiled and kept on polishing glasses.

About a month later, Jimmy Leverett up and married Lottie Blake. No, the old geezer wasn't her husband, he was her pa, just like we'd thought at first. That other was a kind of joke fixed up between Jimmy and her pa to trim the bumptious Mr. Gale down to size. Nobody expected it to do quite such a good job though. When the word got around and everybody in Alkali Flats had got over dying of laughter, the Tom Gale jinx was gone forever. He showed up once and heard somebody yell:

"Run for your lives! That old walrus ain't her pa—he's her husband!"

Tom Gale turned redder than a turkey gobbler's wattles and he rode out of town and took himself elsewhere.

The place seems better for it. And folks do say that Jimmy and his yellow-haired wife make a mighty fine looking couple. Even the old geezer with the brush on his upper lip, old man Blake, has become one of the boys.

NEXT ISSUE
TEN PER CENT AND NO MISTAKE
A Boo-Boo Bounce Story by BEN FRANK

TWO-GUN MARSHAL

By Cole Weymouth

NEARLY all the famous gunmen of the West died as they had lived—by the gun. And some died too quickly to make the mark in history they might have rated judging them purely on their skill with a Colt. Such was Dallas Stoudenmire, two-gun marshal of El Paso in the turbulent '80s.

Stoudenmire, a great blond, moustached giant, ex-Confederate war veteran, ex-Ranger, whipped El Paso into shape with blazing sixguns.

He seemed, for a while, to bear a charmed life, coming through gunfights unscathed, and once facing an ambush in which one man was hidden with a double-barreled shotgun to cut him down while others waited with pistols to finish the job. Stoudenmire killed the shotgun wielder and drove the others flying before his blazing guns.

His mistake was in getting into a feud with the Manning brothers, Jim and Frank, who operated a saloon known as the Coliseum Theatre. The feud, similar to the Earp-Clanton brawl of Tombstone, divided El Paso into two factions, those for Manning and those for Stoudenmire.

When the Mannings killed Stoudenmire's brother-in-law, the marshal swore he would clean out the whole crew. But while he waited for opportunity, a truce was arranged, which Stoudenmire scrupulously kept. He was drinking heavily at this time, however, and once made the mistake of going into the Coliseum Theatre for a drink.

Here he was confronted by Dr. Manning, another brother, who accused him of breaking the agreement.

"That's a lie!" Stoudenmire cried, and both men drew their guns on the instant.

Stoudenmire wore no holsters, carrying his guns in his hip pockets and he was considered lightning fast at this type of draw. But Manning got in the first shot, which was stopped by a heavy wallet in Stoudenmire's right breast pocket.

Manning's second shot caught Stoudenmire in the left arm and the marshal's belated fire caught Dr. Manning in the right arm. Manning lost his gun, but lunged at Stoudenmire and threw his arms around him.

Wrestling desperately, the two men reeled through the doors and out on the sidewalk. Jim Gillett, who succeeded Stoudenmire as marshal, and Joe Deaver of the Rangers, ran toward them, but before they could reach the spot, Jim Manning dashed out of the saloon, a gun in his hand.

His first shot missed, but his second caught Stoudenmire in the head and killed him.

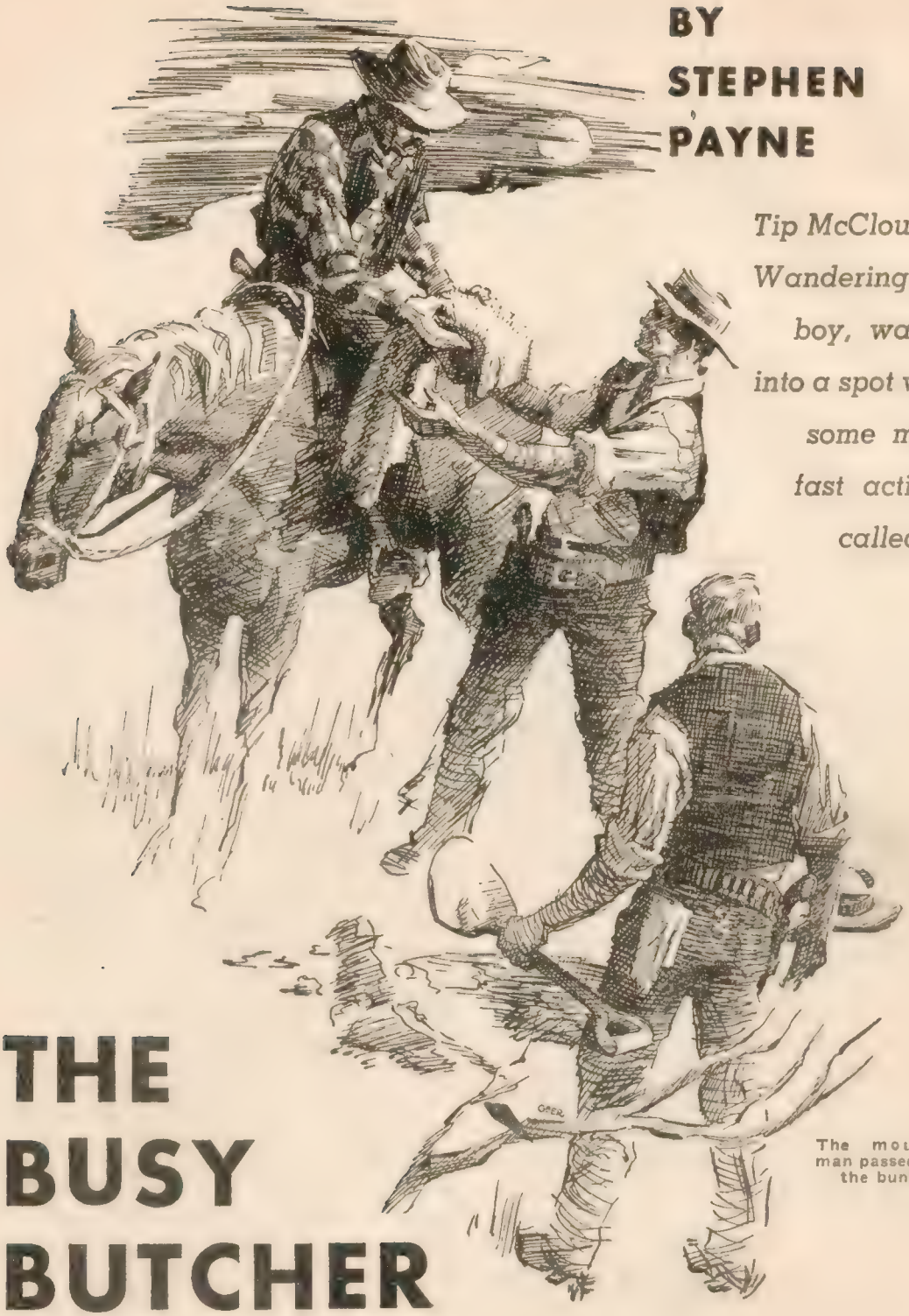
So passed one of the most potent gunmen of the frontier, a man who might have been as well known as Hickok or Masterson had the breaks been just a little different. As for Manning, he was acquitted.

The feud was well known and he was held to be justified in saving his brother's life.

The Turbulent Career of Dallas Stoudenmire

BY STEPHEN PAYNE

Tip McCloud, the Wandering Cowboy, wanders into a spot where some mighty fast action is called for!



The mounted man passed over the bundle

THE BUSY BUTCHER

NOVEMBER nights were cold here in the high country where already the mountains were capped with fresh snow, and drifting rider "Tip" McCloud liked to put up with ranchers along the way. He had neither pack horse nor camp outfit anyhow, had only the big brown he was riding, the

saddle, blanket and bridle it carried, and the clothing on his back, plus, of course, a trusty six-gun.

Coming in from the south, McCloud crossed the meadow of the K Y Bar, mechanically running his eyes over at least a thousand cattle grazing in that haystack-dotted valley. He was riding past a lot on the shallow river where a hundred-odd yearling steers were on feed when something about one of those steers caught his attention.

The cowpuncher reigned in, waiting patiently for the animal to turn around so he might see its right side as well as its left. After it had done that, McCloud clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, moving Bumblefoot along past stable and cow sheds and corrals to the main dwelling of this spread.

"Hello, the house!" he called.

A man stalked out—a stocky, middle-aged man with a big round head resting on forward-thrust shoulders as if he had no neck at all. He had a brown mustache and deeply socketed, piggish eyes. The rest of his face looked as if it had been roughly hewn from granite. Something granite-like, too, was in his aggressive and unfriendly manner.

"Well?" he challenged.

"I was figgerin' to stay all night," said McCloud gently.

Farther to the south where he was well known, range bullies had found the gentle drawling quality of that voice most deceptive. He could be mighty sudden, and his big hands packed an awful wallop.

"Wantin' a job?" the rancher demanded.

"Got one up to Craggy Buttes—if I ever get there. . . . I see yuh're cookin' supper. I'll give yuh a hand. Where'll I put my hoss?"

"Sorry," growled the stocky man, "but I just can't put yuh up. Craggy Buttes is only twelve miles. Yuh can make that ride easy yet tonight."

IT HAD been McCloud's experience on the range that ordinarily a fellow didn't even ask for accommodations at the headquarters of any sizable cow outfit. He rode in, either stabled his mount or turned it in a pasture, and made himself at home in the bunkhouse.

The big puncher's eyes flashed and his lips tightened.

"Reckon I heard yuh right, mister?" he drawled.

"You heard me. Town's straight on north."

The man pointed, then turned back into his kitchen, definitely closing the brief interview.

But as the door opened and closed McCloud caught sight of another man in the room, a tall, red-whiskered fellow who had the look of a rancher. The puncher also took notice of three hands who had just ridden up to the stable and were unsaddling. He decided instantly that he didn't like them any better than he liked their boss. With a shrug he hit out on the north road.

The sun went down behind rugged mountains lifting their enormous shoulders against the blue skyline. Chill currents of air brushed McCloud's cheeks and went through his shirt. Far over at his left a pinpoint of light came alive to mark a ranch. But that would be out of his way.

Then quite abruptly he saw a valley at his right, and the shapes of buildings under a low bluff looked good to the tired rider. A few minutes later he decided this was just a homesteader's place, but the settler had managed to get the claim fenced and a couple of stacks of hay harvested. He had a neat log cabin, and a corral adjoined by a shed to shelter a couple of milk cows.

The man of the outfit was milking, but when McCloud saw a girl step out of the cabin and pause to look at him, he turned that way. "Howdy, ma'am," he said, pulled off his dust-painted hat, and stared at a slender, extremely

blond girl. An elusive quality which was personality, but to which he could not put a name, sort of got him at first sight of her.

She, too, was staring, and with reason, for he had been told he was so plain darned homely he sort of fascinated folks. They didn't look twice at him because he was good-looking, but rather because he wasn't—tall, slab-shouldered, lanky, with unruly black hair, alert brown eyes and a lantern jaw. Due to an accident, his nose was crooked, and his mouth was too big for his lean brown face. But he had a fetching grin.

The girl, first to recover her poise, broke the spell.

"You from the K Y Bar?" she asked, and though her voice was sweet and musical, there was sharp challenge in the question.

"No. That outfit wouldn't let me stop overnight. For a cow outfit I think that's doggoned queer. Never had it happen to me before, ma'am. Tell me something about the K Y Bar."

"A mean outfit," she answered all in one breath. "Link Bradford hates us and has tried to run us out."

McCloud pinched his long chin. "So the boss' name's Link Bradford. We-ell, I don't like him much better than he likes you folks."

The girl's eyes—they were a light blue and had a disconcertingly penetrating quality—sparkled with sudden suspicion.

"Are you just saying that, so—well, so you can put something over on us greenhorns? Frankly, my brother and I have reason to dislike and distrust all cowboys and cowmen."

"Yuh have?" blurted McCloud. "That's sort of too bad, ma'am. I'm a stranger, and I'd like to—" He checked himself on the point of saying, "know you better," and changed it to "stay over night."

The blond girl gave Bumblefoot a commiserating glance. Anyone could see that both horse and rider were tired.

"Well," she temporized uncertainly, just then the man walked quickly across the yard, stopped and set down his milk pail.

Like his sister, he was young and blond, but he was also weathered and lean and hard-muscled, from outdoor work. His eyes held a frosty gleam. His manner was openly aggressive and hostile.

"We have no place to put up anybody," he said coldly, "and we wouldn't take in a cowpuncher if we had the room."

McCloud felt color rush up his neck and spread even to his forehead.

"Twice in one evening," he said, unable to keep bitterness out of his voice. "Don't know as I blame yuh, young feller, but I do think yuhr'e lettin' yore dislike of the K Y Bar run too wide and loose."

THE smell of coffee and of something else cooking on the stove in the cabin came through the open door to his nostrils, reminding him how starved he felt, and the nearness of the girl sort of got him. He had never seen one like her, and he did want to be friends. But he was a cowpuncher, the girl and her brother were settlers, and between them lay a gulf—a gulf which had been widened and deepened by the K Y Bar's hatred of this little outfit.

"How do I know yuh ain't one of their riders?" the young fellow challenged.

"I don't think he is, Dick," the girl said quickly. "And just this once, couldn't we—"

"No." The man turned to face his sister, anger snapping in his eyes. "Norma, can't be yuh're interested in—in a cowboy? They've dealt us nothin' but dirt since we settled here. Clayte Warren's C W outfit is almost as bad as Link Bradford's K Y Bar."

The girl called Norma was suddenly blushing. Without a word she wheeled

quickly and gracefully and returned to the cabin. As she vanished Tip McCloud felt as if all the light had gone from the darkening world and the sky.

Dick hooked his thumbs in the sides of the bib of his roomy overalls and surveyed the cowboy with silent disapproval and challenge. He had spoken his mind and was waiting for the rider to drift along. But anger and stubbornness held the rebuffed McCloud a moment longer.

"Is Clayte Warren a tall, red-whiskered jigger?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes, he is," Dick replied, and added, "So what?"

"Nothin' much," said McCloud. But he thought: "Just the same it sort of seems to me as if this Warren and this Bradford were makin' medicine, and for that reason Bradford wouldn't let me stop on his place."

A moment later he remarked, "I might be of service to you folks later on. Sheriff Gooding of Craggy Buttes wrote me to come and fill a deputy sheriff's boots. That change the setup for yuh, Dick?"

The young man hesitated, then his jaw clamped.

"Sheriff Gooding won't stand up to Link Bradford," he snapped. "Good night, deputy."

He picked up his milk pail, stepped toward the cabin, opened the homemade door and closed it behind him.

McCloud hunched his saddle-warped shoulders and turned Bumblefoot out of the yard. Stars rode out on night herd by ones and twos and dozens as he again took the trail to Craggy Buttes. But when he was half a mile along, the puncher turned back and rode to a leafless aspen grove on a hill north of Dick and Norma's cabin.

He swung down, unsaddled, picketed Bumblefoot on the northern slope of the hill and prepared to spend the night without food or a fire. A fire would attract Dick and Norma, and they would probably chase him off.

He was without adequate bedding, but this didn't matter. He was going to ride close herd on the homesite. Maybe this was just a silly hunch; maybe he was crazy, maybe not. But two-three things added up and indicated trouble in store for the young homesteaders. Could be Bradford and his crew and Warren had some sinister and underhanded play planned for this very night.

Starting out on his own at sixteen, Tip McCloud had worked for half a hundred cow outfits. He had horse savvy, cow savvy, range savvy, from the roots up, and he'd had his full share and part in range wars, learning a lot about cowmen which was not always to their credit.

Sure, this case was none of his buttin, at least not until he was sworn in as a deputy sheriff, and that greenhorn settler Dick had made him doggoned mad. But there was Norma.

Norma. McCloud planted his back against an aspen, staring at the lights in the settlers' cabin and out across the valley to sagebrush reaches and beyond those reaches to hulking mountains, and meditated. Wasn't a human being a funny critter, himself the prime example? He had gone along never giving any girl a second thought until all at once he saw one that was somehow different, and something smote him. Aw, shucks, she hated him, and he was as crazy as a sheepherder.

NEVERTHELESS he kept his vigil, and the night grew colder and darker. The lights in the cabin went out, then he had nothing more to keep him company until at last dimly seen figures revealed themselves to his darkness-accustomed eyes.

Years of night-herding cattle had increased the night vision of his strong eyes. Yet he could not make out exactly what those figures possibly an eighth of a mile south of the buildings were doing, until they came in closer.

The figures became three men and three horses. One man was carrying something in front of him on his saddle. The other two were leading their horses, burdened with something which they took from the animals' backs and put under the shed on the Norma-Dick homesite.

Afterward, all three of the men moved to where an old mowing machine sat. McCloud made out that one carried a shovel. The two on foot moved the mowing machine and took turns digging a hole on the spot where it had stood. The mounted man passed over the bundle he carried which was eased into that hole, his companions filled it with dirt, then shoved the mower back in place.

By this time, Tip McCloud had descended the hill until, protected by rank grass and brush, he was within twenty feet of the fellows, whom he was not surprised to identify as Link Bradford and two of his crew. Apparently their footprints and the horse tracks gave them some worried concern.

"Like we allowed all along," Link said, low-voiced, "the ground's so dry and hard I don't think we need worry a doggoned bit. The trap's set. Let's go."

Impulse urged McCloud to draw his six-shooter and force an immediate showdown. But the whimsical side of his nature intervened, and his love of forcing practical jokes to backfire—though this was far more sinister and wicked than any practical joke—impelled him to hold his hand. Moreover, it had occurred to him that he had an ace in the hole, if only he could play it.

The three departed. He waited until all sound of hoofbeats had faded to silence, then he went to the shed. Four quarters of beef, about yearling size, now hung from one of its rafters. McCloud nodded. Now he knew beyond any doubt that the K Y Bar men had driven a yearling up close to the Dick-Norma homesite and butchered it.

Early tomorrow morning someone was going to visit this homestead and find the offal, then the quarters of beef. But the someone, who was all primed to make these discoveries, would not find the hide, which McCloud was certain had been buried under the old mowing machine, until after Link Bradford and the sheriff had been summoned.

It was a foregone conclusion that the hide carried the K Y Bar brand, and it would pin guilt of butchering a K Y Bar critter on Dick and Norma. It would—unless Tip McCloud, who knew the inside of this snakish frameup, did something about it!

The big cowpuncher got Dick's shovel and dug up the hide. Not wanting to take the chance of rousing either Dick or Norma by lighting a match, he ran his hand over it to feel out the brand. Astonishment rippled through him when he discovered that the brand was C W. But that was quite all right with him.

He put the hide in a gunnysack, and saddled Bumblefoot. Taking the hide with him he rode crowline to the K Y Bar and silently prowled the buildings. All of the outfit, Link Bradford and three hired men, were now at home. All seemed to be sleeping soundly, yet it was touchy business for McCloud to invade the kitchen and arm himself with a butcher knife and cleaver. If Link and his tough hands caught the prowler his life would be snuffed out as one blows out a candle. But he got safely free of the kitchen.

The woodpile provided an axe, and then McCloud rode into the lot, where he had by daylight observed the yearlings on feed. A sliver of a late-rising moon enabled him to pick out the one particular animal he wanted. He eased it out of the feed lot and drove it to the corrals, which were empty. Here, one pen was rigged up as a slaughtering pen, and was equipped with a hoisting device to lift a beef carcass free of the ground.

McCLOUD'S yearling was on the fight long before he got it into the slaughtering pen, and because a shot would rouse the ranch, he had to rope it and throw it and stun it with the axe. But he managed and considering the poor light, he did an expert job of butchering. He hung a green beef hide on the fence, rolled up another hide in a gunnysack and took it back with him to the Dick-Norma homesite. Then he planted it under the mowing machine, filling in the hole again.

McCloud was in the aspens when daylight broke across the mountain world. With its coming came also three riders, one of whom he had seen before—a tall, red-whiskered man. On the crisp morning air voices carried clearly, so he heard this fellow hail young Dick as he stepped out of the cabin to begin his chores.

"Hello there, Dick Nugent! We're drifting over to Big Sage Flats to see if we can pick up odd cattle the fall roundup missed, and just dropped past yore place taking a shortcut. How're yuh makin' out?"

"Why, good mornin', Mr. Warren," Dick answered, as if astonished. "Not often I see the owner of the big C W outfit. Of course it's all right to cut across our place."

McCloud, unseen himself, now had a good look at Warren, the rangy, red-whiskered old cowman, and sized him up as being plenty unreasonable and tough. Obviously Warren and Bradford had decided that Warren was to be the man to discover the beef—the frameup which was planned to put Dick behind bars and wreck his and his sister's home, wreck their very lives. Dirty business. And all his cowpunching days until now Tip McCloud had fought on the cowmen's side, had considered their cause as just!

A few moments of awkward silence ran along, and then one of the punchers plucked at Warren's sleeve.

"Look yonder, Boss!" he said excitedly. "What's that over across the creek, with crows and magpies gathered around it?"

"Go see what it is, Hank," directed the cowman. "Nice little cabin yuh've built here, Dick. How's yore sister? . . . Oh! Good mornin', Miss Norma."

"Good morning, Mr. Warren," said the girl as she stepped out of the cabin.

McCloud thought grimly, "Norma and Dick are respectful to old Warren. Must think he's better than Bradford. Old wolf's tarred by the same stick."

The voice of Hank, the puncher who had dashed away to investigate what he had seen across the creek, rolled to those at the cabin.

"Somebody's beefed a critter here!"

Being north of the cabin, McCloud could see all of the actors in this drama on the east or front side of it. He saw both Norma and Dick start violently.

"Why—why, what can Hank mean?" Dick cried.

Warren had been smiling. Now his face changed and his eyes showed a savage glint.

"It can't mean yuh've been stealin' a beef, Dick?" he growled. "Or can it?"

Hank loped back and stopped at the shed and corral. Bending from his saddle, he looked under the shed, then straightened.

"The carcass is hung up here!" he shouted.

Norma threw an apprehensive glance at her brother. The two were not so green but that they realized something ominous and frightening was in the air.

"Some mistake," she said clearly. "We haven't butchered any animal at all, except a jackrabbit."

In a sort of terrible silence Warren rode to the shed, had his look, and rode back.

"It was yore critter, of course, Nugent?" he asked. "Where's the hide to prove it?"

"Hide?" Dick almost screamed, sud-

denly rattled. "I—we don't know anything about this. Nothin'!"

Warren glowered at him. "Hank," he rapped out, "flag yore kite to the K Y Bar. Get Bradford, bring him here. Jerry, get to town, bring the sheriff."

The two cowpunchers whirled their broncs and fed them steel. "Take it easy, Dick—and you too, Miss Nugent—till we get more company," Warren said grimly. "Then we'll look for the hide."

"Look for the hide?" repeated the girl. The whiteness of her face, the strain in her voice, bit into Tip McCloud. "Just what do you mean, Mr. Warren?"

The cowman shrugged. "If it had been yore critter you folks would have left the hide where it could be seen and examined. That's custom, yuh know. The hide will prove whose animal it was you folks beefed last night."

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl. She tossed her head and was suddenly defiant. "We have nothing to fear, because we did not beef anybody's critter. I'll be getting breakfast, Dick. Go about your chores. . . . Mr. Warren, I thought you were more decent than Bradford, but I'm about to change my mind. But make yourself comfortable." She went into the cabin.

"Good girl!" McCloud silently applauded.

DICK said something low-voiced to Warren, then he began his chores. Warren dismounted and sat in the sun, and time ran along until Bradford, accompanied by one of his own men, dashed in on sweating horses. Hank was not with them.

Warren briefly explained the situation to Bradford.

"Well, well, I can't believe it!" Bradford said, apparently much astonished.

More time passed. McCloud supposed the Nugents ate their breakfast, and he wondered how they enjoyed it. He would have enjoyed it, figuring his stomach must think his throat had been cut.

Eventually the sheriff and Jerry arrived. Ten years ago, when he was a mere kid, McCloud had known Gooding. Now, seeing the man again, he was shocked. Sheriff Gooding was old, grizzled, bald and stooped. But that would not have counted against him if it had not been so apparent that he was uncertain and fumbling, lacking both fire and force. No wonder the peace officer had need of a live-wire deputy. But why had he thought of Tip McCloud and written him a letter which had been forwarded by Tip's folks?

Oho! McCloud recalled a chase after horse thieves he had taken with Fred Gooding when he had been a wild young sprout. McCloud had been a reckless daredevil, but he had saved Gooding's life, and had proved himself. Now he felt warm sympathy toward the old sheriff over whose eyes two range-hog cowmen were going to pull the wool.

Warren and Bradford welcomed the lawman, and Warren stated the case. He and Hank and Jerry had dropped past this homestead, intending to round up Big Sage Flats, and had seen the butchered critter. Dick Nugent and his sister refused to explain it, and had obviously hidden the hide. A hunt for that all-important item might turn it up.

Norma and Dick stood together, doing nothing, saying nothing, while the hunt got under way. But never, never had McCloud been so sympathetic toward homesteaders. He saw them in a new light, not as squatters who were as obnoxious to cowmen as predatory animals, and more objectionable because they took up grassland and water-holes and curtailed open range, but as earnest human beings desiring only the right to make homes, earn a decent living, and become respected citizens of the great West.

Heretofore he had blindly followed

the cowmen, believing they were right. Last night he had looked into the eyes and face of a lovely girl openly hostile toward him, and had suddenly longed to fight for her. He had done it, too. But—he grimaced—she would probably never realize it.

The men took a long time to discover the hide. Of course Bradford knew where to look, but he was playing foxy. So was Warren. They wanted Sheriff Gooding to find it, and at last the sheriff did.

"By grab, this mower's been moved. A hole dug under it, too! Move the mower, boys. Get a shovel and dig."

The hired hands dug, pulled something out of the ground—green beef hide. The Nugents and all hands gathered around as Gooding spread it out. McCloud saw Warren and Bradford exchange winks.

"I'll bet we find Warren's C W brand on it!" Bradford said loudly.

Came the bombshell. Gooding straightened up.

"This hide came off a maverick," he said. "There's no brand on it!"

"No brand on it!" gasped Bradford, his granite face twitching.

Warren glowered at him, muttering something under his breath. Both men fought to regain their poise, but found it difficult.

Faintly smiling at Norma and her brother, Gooding spoke again.

"A maverick belongs to anybody who gets it, picks it up, claims it for his own. You two kids are in the clear. Even if yuh did beef a critter—somethin' that ain't been proved, though it looks like yuh did—yuh beefed a maverick. Somethin' yuh had every right to do. There's no charge against yuh. Go right ahead and use that meat. But hang this hide on the fence in the open where folks can see it."

McCloud got a thrill from watching Norma and Dick embrace and shake off their dark worry and fear. He got an even bigger kick out of watching Bradford and Warren and their punchers. They were baffled. Moreover, the two somehow were suddenly suspicious of each other. Nevertheless each man blustered:

"Glad it turned out this way. Guess that's that, and we'll be goin'."

THEN a rider on a foam-flecked horse dashed in, reined up. It was Warren's cowpuncher, Hank.

"Got somethin' to tell you, Clayte," he shouted, and half-pulled Warren aside.

"Tell me, too," snapped Bradford, and crowded up to the rider.

"Let me in on it!" shouted Gooding.

Hank hesitated. He was all worked up, McCloud noted.

"All right," he lashed out. "Yuh can all hear it. After I'd told Link Bradford to come here, I stopped at the K Y Bar for breakfast. Then I noticed magpies and crows at Link's slaughter pen in his corrals. A yearlin' had been butchered there and"—the man's voice rose—"the hide hangin' on the fence is a C W hide!"

McCloud understood it, if no one else did. And that Hank of the C W outfit had found this hide was, in McCloud's opinion, all to the good.

"This is better than I'd dared to hope for!" he told himself.

"The hide came off one of my steers?" Warren demanded.

"I've just told yuh so!" Hank snapped.

Warren turned on Bradford. "So-o, yuh killed one of my beefs? What's more, yuh know what I mean, Link, when I say yuh've doublecrossed me. A maverick's hide!"

"Shut up, Clayte!" Bradford roared. "I don't know and can't see—"

"Ho!" yelled Warren, "Can't yuh? If yuh've slaughtered one of my critters—and that CW hide seems to prove it—I'll send yuh over the road . . . Sheriff Gooding, investigate this right now!"

So abruptly they all went away and

they left Norma and Dick Nugent staring open-mouthed after their running horses. Then, hearing a noise behind them, Norma and Dick turned to see Tip McCloud holding his hands over his stomach and bent double, chuckling.

"You!" cried Norma. "What's so funny?"

"The kicker that set those two scurvy old coyotes at one another's throats," McCloud returned.

Norma smiled mirthlessly "To us there's nothing funny about any of it. I don't understand about that hide with no brand on it. Surely the man who tried so hard to frame us would not have made such a glaring mistake as to pick a maverick." She looked hard at Tip McCloud, suspiciously, searchingly. "You're on foot now, and you pop up from nowhere. Where were you last night?"

"I was a busy butcher," said McCloud, "but fortunately I had seen one maverick in the K Y Bars' feed lot."

"Oho! . . . Dick, this man—we owe our freedom to him. He saved us. I still don't know just how. Tip—Tip McCloud!" There was a lift to her voice and a light flashing in her eyes that was good to see. "You must tell me all about it. But you must be awfully hungry, so first I'll get breakfast for you."

"And then we'll talk," said McCloud. "If yuh'll get breakfast for me I'll figger I'm the luckiest, meddlin' cowpoke who ever skinned a beef. Am I happy!"

"No happier than I am," Norma returned simply, and smiled with something in her face that promised so much for the puncher that maybe he would turn down that deputy sheriff job and take up a homestead himself.

After the wallop they had been handed, neither Bradford nor Warren would venture to pick on homeseekers again!

Sweet Music in Sierra Nevada

THE main gold prospectors' camp in Sierra Nevada county, California, was a thriving community. There was little that it lacked, but one of its lacks was children. There wasn't a youngster for 100 miles around or more. If the need was felt it wasn't voiced by these hard-faced, determined men.

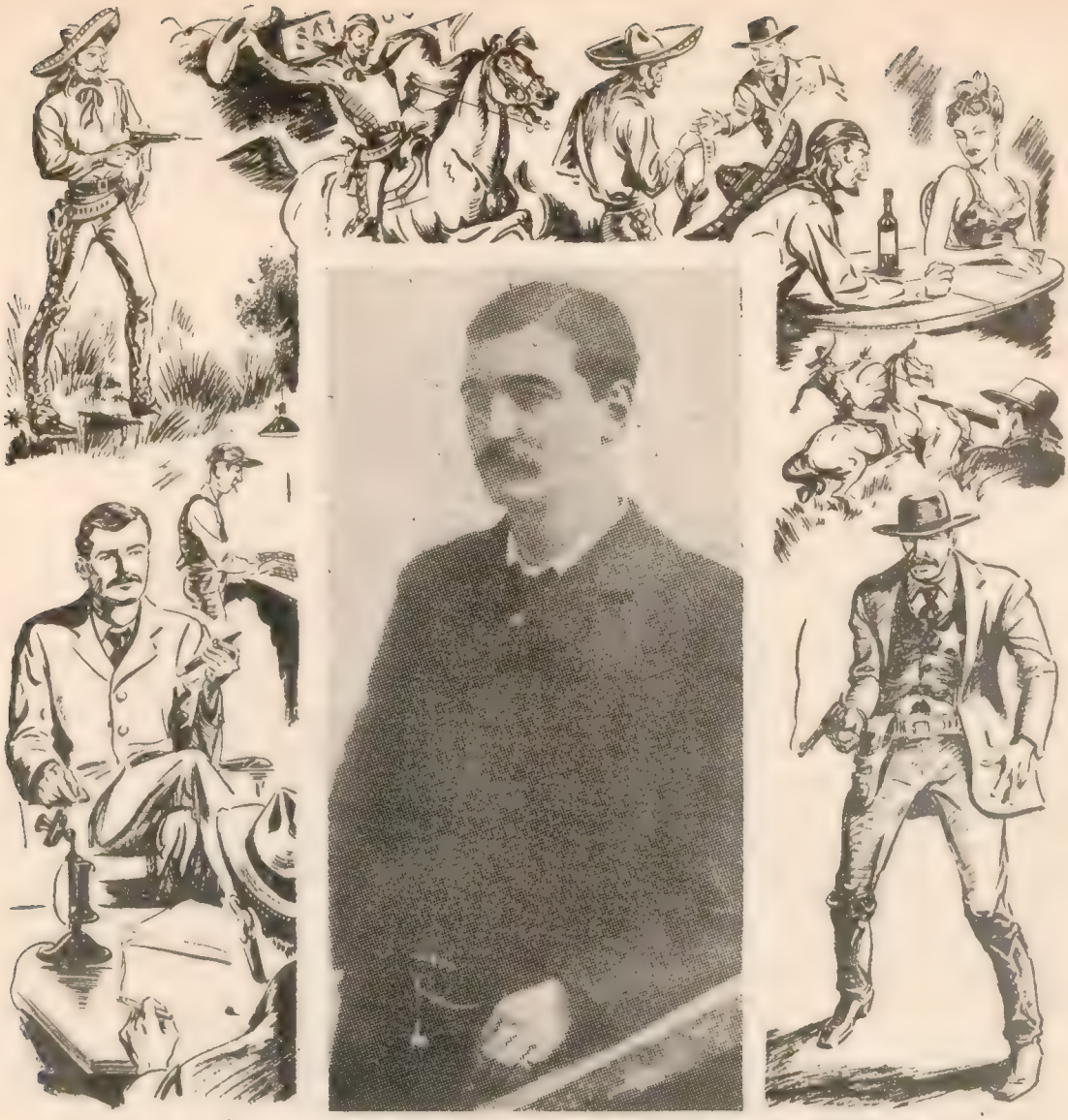
On the 4th of July while the miners were boisterously celebrating with much gunplay, a new note pierced the cacophony of noise—the protesting squeal of a new-born babe. At first none noted it; gradually the strange sound penetrated the minds of the men who had almost forgotten family life.

"Shut up," bawled one lusty fellow. "Give the baby a chance."

Perhaps it was fear of the big man with the angry face or perhaps it was the memory of a previous chapter of their existence. For the next quarter of an hour the hard men there drank in the only sound that stirred, the baby's cries.

"Hurray for the baby," shouted another fellow and the miners ripped the welkin with their welcoming yells. They took up a collection of nuggets and gold dust and a committee sought out the mother and requested that she accept it as a token of appreciation for the "sweet music" the baby had given them.

—SIMPSON M. RITTER.



IOWA NELL and the TOMCAT

The first in a new series of salty true tales as told to the author by Bat Masterson himself in the evening of the life of that great Western gun-fighting sheriff!

SMILING affably, Bat Masterson lighted a long black cigar and made sure it was burning to his satisfaction. Then he leaned back in his chair and gazed at the group of *Morning Telegraph* reporters who were seated around him. Every night, after the paper had gone to press, they had developed a habit of gathering at the vacant racing copytable to hear him tell about the days when he had been a fighting sheriff at Dodge City and the

by Sam Gardenhire

West was really wild and woolly.

Masterson took a deep breath. His gaze drifted over the great editorial room, with its multitude of desks, now unoccupied. Up front, Charlie Meeghan, the night editor—a lonely figure in a green eye-shade—was sorting news stories from his multiple wire basket and marking head numbers on bundles of copy. The rest of the staff was out snatching a midnight lunch. Through the half opened window of Ashby Deering's room came the muted murmur of West Fiftieth Street, and of Eighth Avenue, further away.

"Today I was readin' 'a serial story that's runnin' in a magazine," Masterson said, mentioning the name of the publication. "It's supposed to be a Western yarn." He made a grimace of disgust. "Shucks! It's a gangster story."

"I'm reading that story, too," one of the reporters said. "Seemed all right to me. What's wrong with it, Bat?"

Masterson puffed at his cigar. "Well, the author has the villain abduct the heroine and ride away, usin' her as a shield to protect himself from the bullets of the pursuin' posse. Why, that's ridiculous! Such a thing couldn't have happened in the old West.

"You see the author thought, if he dressed folks up in cowboy costumes—that's how he referred to 'em, as costumes—had 'em ride around an untamed landscape which he describes in beautiful language, talkin' lingo, and shootin' off guns, he'd have a Western story. But that doesn't make a Western yarn. It never will ring true unless you know their customs out there, the way they acted and thought, and, above all, their peculiar codes of conduct—the things they *didn't* do.

"One of the strictest codes they had was that two men couldn't fight in the presence of a good woman. It prevailed all through the West and I never heard of it bein' broken. O. Henry wrote one of his greatest stories on that subject, A Technical Error. Except for hostile Injuns, a good woman out there was just as safe as if protected by the United States Army. No outlaw, no matter how tough, would ever have dreamed of molestin' her. Boone Helm, a leader in Henry Plummer's band of stage robbers, once killed a member of the band for swearin' at a lady because she didn't get out of the stage they were holdin' up, quick enough. And Helm was one of the worst ruffians on the border—a thief, murderer, cannibal—as cold, cruel and lawless as they come."

"You mention good women," a reporter said. "Did the rule apply to dance-hall girls as well?"

Masterson nodded. "In a way, yes," he said. "But of course, they were a pretty hard lot, and the rules didn't apply so uncompromisingly to them. Once in a while they'd get hurt by accident. In those days Dodge City was wide open. It was known as the wickedest city in the West. Front Street was jammed with tough drinkin' places, one-story wooden shacks shouldering each other cheek by jowl, and the men and women who cavorted there were gathered for the sole purpose of breakin' the Ten Commandments. In such an atmosphere brawls are apt to explode plumb abrupt, and occasionally a dance-hall girl would get in the way of something. Usually it was accidental." His face took on a reminiscent expression. "Did I ever tell you about Iowa Nell and the Tomcat?"

The reporters settled back to listen. . .

HIS real name was Constantino Gato and he worked for the Peabody Ranch, not far from Dodge City. His father was a Mexican and his mother, a Choctaw Injun. That's what they said, but I can't vouch for it. All I know is that he had a coffee-colored skin and ambitions to be bad. Which wasn't natural. Plenty of cowboys who came to Dodge City in those days, liked

to think they were hard to curry below the knees.

Gato was tall and skinny, with a long nose and dark beady eyes set too close together. He had long black hair and sideburns, a mustache and goatee. He wore gold earrings, a silk scarf around his head, and a big silver-braided sombrero tilted over one eye. His tight leather leggings had silver buttons runnin' up the side, *vaquero* fashion, and his high-heeled boots sported the biggest spurs I ever saw in my life.

He claimed to be Spanish but he could talk English just as well as you or I. When he got excited, however, he'd forget and lapse into some language which I guess was Choctaw.

He worked for the Peabodys as a hoss buster, and he was a good one for, like all people with Injun blood in 'em, he had a way with such animals. He could tame a wild-eyed cayuse into a good saddle pony in half the time it would take a white man to do the job. But Gato wasn't content. He had a hankerin' to be a killer like King Fisher or John Wesley Hardin.

Gato used to spend all his spare time practisin' with a six-gun in a ravine out behind the bunkhouse. He got so he could whip it out of the holster and roll five shots into the bullseye. One day Curly Jenkins, another Peabody rider, happens to come across him makin' this war medicine. Curly draws rein and watches him.

"What are yuh aimin' to do, Tomcat?" Curly finally asks. "Depopulate Ford County?"

Gato grins sour. "Purty soon I'll make all these smart Alecs who keep callin' me Tomcat, plumb hard to find."

Curly nods at the target. "Yuh would, too, if that was all there was to it. But don't forget that bullseye ain't shootin' back at you; such things can make a heap of difference in a tight spot." He settles back in the saddle and tightens the reins. "Do you know what I think, Tomcat? I think you're nothin' but a marksman, like them Germans I saw down to St. Louis the last time I was there. If you lived in that town, you'd belong to a club and wear a *Schutzenfeder* in yore hat."

Then Jenkns chuckles and rides away.

It wasn't long after this that I began to have trouble with Gato. One evenin', just before sundown, I was settin' in a little poker game at the Alamo with Luke Short, "Chalk" Beeson, Charlie Bassett and some of the boys, when I hear the sound of yelpin' outside and the clatter of a horse's hoofs on the boards outside. I toss in my hand quick and make for the door.

Sure enough, when I hits the open air, I see a cowboy, mounted on a pinto pony, ridin' lickety-split up and down the sidewalk, wavin' his hat and whoopin' at the top of his voice. Right away I plants myself in his path. He sees who it is and pulls up fast.

"Stop that!" I sing out. "What do you mean by ridin' on the sidewalk? Oh, it's you, Tomcat. I'm surprised at you. You know the rules. You ain't no Texas stranger."

He quits yellin'. He gives me a sheepish look.

"Aw, don't get proddy, Bat," he says. "I was just funnin'."

But I'm watchin' him plumb close now, because I'm rememberin' what Curly Jenkins has told me and Luke Short about the target practice.

"You aimin' to stay here for the evenin'?" I ask him.

"Shore," he says. "I got paid today—nearly seven months' wages—and I'm spreadin' myself tonight in these low dives of your'n, high, wide and handsome."

"If that's the case," I tell him, "you'll have to check yore artillery first with Johnny Newton, in the Wright and Beverly General Store."

His eyes pop open wide. "Not me!" he objects. "I'll be needin' this shootin'-iron for my own protection."

"As Marshal of Dodge City, I'll fur-

nish all the protection you need," I answers. "I'm givin' you my personal guarantee." I hold out my hand. "You can turn over that gun to me right now. I'll go to the trouble of checkin' it for you."

He gets off the cowpony real slow, watchin' me, but he don't hand over the gun.

"I ain't a-goin' to do it," he says at last, low and tough.

I give him a hard look, still holdin' out my hand, and get plenty sharp with him:

"Do what I say, or pull yore gun quick!"

He looks at me for a moment and I can almost see his mind working, balancin' chances. Then his eyes flicker and he licks his lips, and I knows there ain't goin' to be a showdown. He reaches down plumb slow and tender, unhooks the cartridge belt like he's handlin' eggs, and passes it over to me with the six-gun still in the holster.

I don't waste a second look at the Tomcat. Takin' the six-gun and belt, I go up the street to the general store and pass them over to Johnny Newton, the manager, tellin' him to return the Tomcat's property when he's ready to ride back to the ranch. Then I return to the card game.

IT SEEMS that what I've done don't set right with the Tomcat a little bit. He goes down the street to the Alhambra and starts to fill up on red-eye, mutterin 'threats and actin' plenty mean and vicious.

Purty soon Iowa Nell, a dance-hall girl who knows Tomcat fairly well, notices him sittin' at a table all by himself, glowerin' and drinkin' whisky, and she sets down beside him to find out what's put him on the prod. He opens up with his troubles and tells her he's aimin' to borrow a shotgun and change me into a colander. When she tells him he's talkin' plumb foolish, he loses his temper and cracks her across the mouth with his hand. Such treatment of women don't go in Dodge City, so Ike Rogers, who happens to be in the Alhambra at the time, grabs the Tomcat by the scruff of the neck and kicks him out of the place.

It seems this action switches all of Tomcat's wrath in a different direction. Now he stands outside of the Alhambra, just burnin' to get even with Ike Rogers. At last he heads for the outskirts of town, frothin' for revenge.

What the Tomcat does after that, nobody can say for sure. From what I was told later, he fills up on more red-eye and buys himself another six-gun and belt from a Mexican. Then he tries to get Hurricane Bill Jones, a former buffalo hunter, to sell him Gold Nugget, offerin' almost a year's pay for that racin' pony. But Bill has been cleanin' up all year with Gold Nugget and he wouldn't have sold that little hoss for the whole State of Kansas.

Finally the Tomcat quits wastin' breath. He goes out, gets his saddle and steals Gold Nugget. You see, his plans call for a fast hoss and the pony he'd brought in from the Peabody ranch don't measure up to what he'll need. After cinchin' his rig tight, he rides up Front Street, lookin' for trouble.

He draws rein in front of the Alhambra and lets out a cowboy yell.

"Yip-yip-yippee! Ike! Ike Rogers!"

It ain't Ike Rogers who runs to the doorway—it's Iowa Nell. But Tomcat ain't particular. He cuts loose twice with the six-gun and kills her deader'n a stone. Then he claps spurs to Gold Nugget and gets away from there fast.

The news about what he's done reaches me in the Alamo when Ike Rogers comes bustin' in on our game.

"Bat!" he yells. "Yuh're needed. The Tomcat's just killed Iowa Nell and he's gettin' away on a fast hoss."

"What?" I says. "That pinto?"

"No," Ike answers. "He's lifted Hurricane Bill's Gold Nugget and he'll be plumb hard to round up. That hoss

can't fly but it can catch birds. Charlie Rath saw him go and he was hittin' nothin' but high places."

This matter is serious. I cash in my chips and head for the back door. Out behind, in the corral, I look over the horses and finally rope me a big rangy loose-limbed sorrel. He ain't nowise in the class of Gold Nugget, but he's a laster and he'll do. I saddle up, ride around and go into the Alamo to get my Sharps buffalo gun and a belt of fifty-caliber specials.

Ike Rogers is still there tellin' about it. "Right through the heart," he says. "She's deader'n Reconstruction!"

I looks at Rogers. "Was he goin' south, do you know?"

"Yep," says Ike. "That's what Charlie said."

Luke Short speaks up: "He's probably linin' out for the Cherokee Strip. Them's his old stampin' grounds before he hired out to the Peabody. Bring him back, Bat, so we can hang him."

I wheels the sorrel around and heads southeast. It is pitch dark now and there isn't any use in wastin' time tryin' to cut his sign. My best bet of savin' myself a long chase lies in outthinkin' the Tomcat, not followin' tracks. So I heads direct for the Medicine Lodge Branch, figgerin' to get him at the ford, which he'd likely cross if he was wantin' to get to the Strip.

I rides all night, hittin' a steady pace, pausin' at judicious intervals to breathe the sorrel, and I arrives at Medicine Lodge Ford about an hour before daybreak. Ridin' down the steep bank, I gives the cayuse a little water and stakes him out in a gulley, safe from sight. Then I takes my Sharps out of the boot, loads her up with a fifty-caliber special and squats down behind the river bank to watch the trail.

Dawn arrives. In the growin' light I sees Tomcat comin' on Gold Nugget. He's ridin' easy, but he keeps lookin' back often, the way a man does when he's bein' hunted.

At last he's close enough. I rises up from behind the bank and throws down on him with the buffalo gun. I gives him that familiar challenge:

"Up with yore hands!"

Tomcat whirls around quick, startled. But he doesn't obey. He goes for his six-gun. His two bullets dust the ground near me. And with that I puts a Sharps special through his belt buckle. It knocks him out of the saddle and he falls right under Gold Nugget's hoofs. Frightened, the pony rears up and tramples him several times before shyin' off and stoppin' a short distance away, with droopin' head.

I climbs up over the bank and approaches the Tomcat with my six-gun leveled, plumb cautious and slow, because I'm not takin' any more chances with that outlaw, even though he's wounded.

"You lowdown, good-for-nothin' wolf, you've finished me!" he gasps.

"You lowdown, good-for-nothin' woman-killer, I sure have," I answers. "It was the best job I ever did. And you had yore even break, which you didn't deserve."

Tomcat stiffens out then and dies. I leaves him there on the prairie for the coyotes. I couldn't stop to bury him; the ground was too hard and I hadn't brought a shovel along. . . .

Bat Masterson's voice ceased. Then he gave a low chuckle: "That's all there is to the story, boys," he said. "But Curly Jenkins was right. The Tomcat was no gun-fighter."

"What do you mean by that, Bat?" asked one of the reporters.

"When he downed Iowa Nell, he got her through the heart, quick and accurate," Masterson explained. "But when he cuts loose at me, he's all nervous and skittery. He misses me completely at a time when a real gunman is cold, calm and dangerous. Curly Jenkins spoke the truth. The real test comes when the target starts shootin' back at you!"

THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

Author Pierce, a top hand in the magazine and book field, has made himself a name for brilliant writing, fine western backgrounds and the kind of realism which makes you feel you've known the folks in his story all your life.

You know, the old Ramrod's been herding stories through the cattle chute for so long that he knows most of their earmarks at a glance. There are stories in which the characters are just names —you don't ever really seem to see them, or get to feel close to them. And there are stories in which you get to know the people better than your own family—and that's fine writing.

We rate THUNDER OVER DIABLO CANYON as an exceptional yarn—good writing, crackling action and suspense that builds and builds!

War for Survival

The conflict that hit the Diablo range was the same kind of war for survival that we've been talking about. The cattlemen said that sheep ruined the grazing for cattle; the sheepmen said they had as much right to the range as the cows.

The fight was intensified by the fact that the big cattle owners, who resented the intrusion of sheep, had often no real title or right to the land they used, but merely had preempted it. The land was public and the sheepmen felt they had a perfect moral right to graze their flocks there; that a man who didn't own land could hardly order you off it. And where each party in a fight is convinced he is absolutely right, you get a pretty vicious war. Each man, convinced he is fighting for a principle as much as for his property, becomes a fanatic and a fanatic is doggoned hard to stop.

That was the kind of war that came to the Diablo and found Ron Davis, a cattleman, fighting for sheep, much to his own surprise. Davis was a bred-in-the-bone cattleman. He knew nothing about sheep and cared less and he kept wondering how he had ever gotten mixed up in the whole business.

In fact, Ron Davis had never even intended to come back to his home town of Red Coulee on the Diablo range. His memories of the place were bitter and sweet, and the bitter outran the sweet.

It was the death of his uncle, Ed Davis, that brought him back. That was strange too, for they'd never gotten along. They would have roaring, shouting arguments which usually ended in the same way:

"I'm tryin' to make somethin' out of you!" old Ed would bellow, "and you buck me at every turn. I got five nephews and there ain't one of 'em worth a hoot in hell. Now get off the ranch and stay off!"

A Strange Will

Then Ron would go and stay away for a month or a year. Always, Ed Davis sent for him again. Not that anything had changed. It was as though he were willing to try again. But once Ron hopped a cattle train for Chicago and didn't come back. And now Ed Davis was gone and Ron was back with a thousand dollars in cash, a silver-mounted saddle and a growing reputation as a rodeo rider. It was for the reading of his uncle's will he had returned, and the will was a honey.

"Well, here you are," said the will, "all gathered about to see what falls when Death shakes the tree. If my ghost is in the room, it will see Greedy Jed and Plotting Hank speculating on how to outfox their more fortunate cousins — if there are more fortunate cousins." It added some other choice descriptions of the nephews. "Ron Davis, the lone wolf, is the best of you, even if he is stubborn as a mule, Never could make anything of him."

Then came the terms of the will. "To my beloved nephew Jed Davis, I give and bequeath the Red Coulee Brick Company, provided he works a year, side by side with his day laborers. To Henry Davis, I give the Sunny Slope Gold Mining Company. If he can scheme and plot that into a paying proposition, he deserves a monument. To Ron Davis, who hates sheep to the point that he wouldn't play Run Sheep, Run, with the kids at school, I give the Diablo Canyon Sheep Company."

Ron couldn't sell his sheep ranch. He had to operate it and show a ten percent profit before it became completely his to sell.

It was a challenge and Ron Davis rec-

ognized it as such. And like the pioneer men who never evaded a challenge in the west, he took it. He would operate the ranch, show a profit, then sell out and put his money into cattle, where it belonged.

And so Ron Davis laid the groundwork for the struggle which was to grip the Diablo range and culminate in open war, dynamiting, stampedes and some of the most hair-raising boatrides down the rapids of Diablo River ever put on paper.

This is the kind of a yarn you don't put down, once you've started it, until it's finished, or the house catches fire. The old Ramrod is proud to announce it as the lead novel for our next issue. THUNDER OVER DIABLO CANYON is the name, by Frank Richardson Pierce.

A Tuttle Novelet

And that isn't all. There's a W. C. Tuttle novelet called SKEETER BILL COMES TO TOWN. If you've read Tuttle before—and who hasn't?—you know that a Tuttle yarn is as smooth as cream and just as easy to take. This story concerns a young fellow named Skeeter Bill, who blows into the town of Yellow Butte to find his old friend Hooty Edwards in jail for robbing a bank and Hooty's young wife slinging hash in a restaurant to support herself and her two youngsters.

Skeeter Bill knew Hooty Edwards to be straight as a string and this business amazed him. He wasn't particularly surprised when the young wife, Margie, told him Hooty had sworn he had nothing to do with the robbery. It was all the stimulus Skeeter Bill needed to set out on the job of proving his friend was innocent.

The result? Mystery, action, and much of the whimsical humor that makes a Tuttle story so distinctive and enjoyable an experience in reading.

OTHER GRAND YARNS

We've lots more. Another Boo-Boo Bounce story in which author Ben Frank continues the adventures of the rotund sheriff of Coyote County and his deputy, Hopewell. TEN PERCENT AND NO MISTAKE is its name and it

OUTWEARS LEATHER—WATERPROOF—SLIP-PROOF

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is one hundred percent fun. The troubles Hopewell and Boo-Boo can get into are nothing under the sun, as you will clearly see when you read it.

There is a special providence, they say, which watches over fools and drunks. It could be that Boo-Boo and Hopewell are frequently both, certainly there is some kind of moral lesson in the thought that the boys always land on their feet somehow, no matter how hard they fall. Makes a man think, it does.

Also, Fred Bechdolt continues his fine series of historical articles on the West with ADOBE WALLS, and there are several exceptionally interesting short stories that I'd like to tell you about, but I'd fill up most of this issue doing it. You remember though, when you read them, that I promised you they'd be good and see if it isn't so. Fact, I'm prouder than a poisoned pup about the lineup for our next issue and you just call me on it if you don't agree!

The Mail Pouch

WITH this issue, the Ramrod opens the column to letters from readers. From here on a lot of it is up to you. You write 'em, we'll print excerpts from some of 'em. Be famous. See your name in print. But, seriously, we are interested in our readers, in what they think and say. We're interested in your opinions of the stories because we burn the midnight oil trying to get you good ones and we'd like to know if we're getting close. We appreciate every one of the many swell letters received so far.

Your opinions are more than welcome. Like, just for instance, this letter from a man who wants his letter printed under the pseudonym of Mercury. He might have to take a second look to recognize it, because the ramrod had to translate it into English.

Mercury is a very comical character who writes in a dialect all his own. I'll admit I found it funny enough, but it

(Concluded on page 190)

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BIOGRAPHERS of James Butler Hickok are divided between those who view him as a Frontier Galahad—"without fear and without reproach"—and those who saw him as a murderer who was not averse to shooting a man in the back.

However, all admit that Hickok was one of the mighty figures of Frontier days. And it might be of interest to know how he got the name of "Wild Bill." The story Hickok himself tells runs about like this:

During the Civil War, Hickok ran a supply train for the Union forces based at Fort Leavenworth. In August, 1861, he was attacked by guerrillas and forced to abandon his wagon train. The guerrillas chased him into the nearby town of Independence in a running fight, so that Hickok made a dramatic entrance to the accompaniment of blazing guns.

Feeling the need of a bracer, Hickok repaired to a saloon, only to step into the middle of another uproar.

A tough bunch was taking the saloon apart.

"By the Great Horn Spoon, this is too much!" Hickok shouted, being a man who loved peace and quiet. He made a fast double draw, his guns roared, and in a moment the entire gang was flying before him in terror.

Out into the square they went, while the townspeople who had been bullied for long by this gang, cheered and applauded.

And right then and there the legend was born as a woman screamed, "Good for you, Wild Bill!"

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Concluded from page 188)

takes a week or two to get it figured out and the safest thing would be to translate it. Here's Mercury ratings on the Winter issue:

SHOWDOWN TRAIL. Morton Harper could have sold them the gold-brick and the Brooklyn Bridge from the way the pine-ears listened to him. But a most interesting story, keeps you on pin-feathers all the way.

GREY HORSES CAN'T RUN. Merits one bronze placard of a horse tail.

PERFECT DAZE AND NO MISTAKE. That Mabel Crump is a right smart gal.

RIFLES FOR THE APACHES. Some thriller, this one!

OLD MIKE. Really hack. The old mine—the cave-in—the gold vein—the faint streaks of light ahead—the claim registered—ho, hum!

ROPE FOR RENEGADES. It seems to me that the crooked foreman angle is here to stay. Only when the nero isn't the foreman from the start, the good foreman gets bumped off quick and the crooked foreman is bumped off last. Oh, for a hero's life!

ONE HOUR TO LIVE. I'm not saving four leaf clovers anymore. Moths are better.

SPECIAL FACT FEATURES:

When Texan Trails meet, I opined
You're often much likely to find
A crossroads, two or three or four
Of features good, you have a store.

After reading that alleged poem, we know why he hides behind a nom de plume. I'd leave the country. And now here's a letter typical of scores of other comments received:

Congratulations on the new magazine GIANT WESTERN. Jut about every story in it was swell. Boo-Boo Bounce is very funny. I liked REBELS RIDE PROUDLY, and LAW STAR FOR AN OUTLAW. I read all your other magazines too and like them all. THE BARBER OF TUBAC by Nelson Nye, in TRIPLE WESTERN was the best story in the Winter issue of that magazine.—John Sullivan, Wethersfield, Conn.

Well friends, there it is. This column is yours now, except for snide remarks by me, so just shoot along a letter or postcard to The Editor, GIANT WESTERN, 10 East 40th St., New York, 16 N.Y. Thank you!

—The Ramrod.

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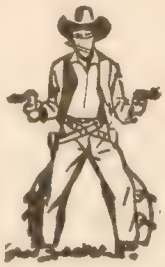
TAX COLLECTOR

Deputy Bill and Rustler Bill Join Forces!

By LEW MARTIN



IN ITS heyday, Tombstone was tough indeed and vastly amused when it heard that Deputy Bill Breakenridge was being sent to collect taxes in the rustler stronghold of Pima County. Collect taxes from rustlers! Tombstone wits howled at the idea.

Any sane man would have turned down the job. But mild-mannered William Milton Breakenridge quietly accepted it and rode out of town. He proceeded to Galeyville, a stronghold of the rustlers, where he calmly looked up Curly Bill Brocious. "Bill," he said, "I've got to collect taxes for the sheriff's office in this territory."

"So?" grunted the rustler chief.

"I'll need a deputy assessor to help me and I want you to take the job."

Curly Bill thought that was the best joke he had ever heard.

"I'll do it!" he roared.

And for the next few days, the deputy and the rustler rode side by side, into hidden mountain canyons, to far-flung rustler ranches, with Curly Bill showing the way. And always as they rode up, Curly Bill would announce:

"We're the tax collectors, boys, so shell out and see that there's no slow count!"

Billy Breakenridge returned to Tombstone with a thousand dollars of tax money and the good wishes of his friend and deputy assessor, Curly Bill Brocius. And thereby broke the hearts of all the wits in Tombstone who had been freely predicting the strange and horrible end which would overtake him.

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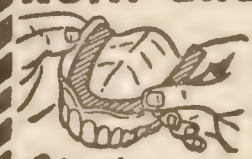

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SLADE of the PONY EXPRESS

Fast-Shootin' Trouble-Shooter

By TEX MUMFORD

TOUGHEST superintendent of a tough breed was Joseph A. Slade, gun-fighting trouble-shooter of the Pony Express' turbulent era. That Slade was a killer is history, that some inner demon rode him with cruel spurs and goaded him to his periodic outbreaks seems obvious from the most casual reading of his career.

Sent to take over a Pony Express division from a superintendent who had made a mess of it, Slade was bushwhacked by the jealous man and cut down by a load of buckshot. He was not badly hit, however, recovered in quick time and came back heeled and looking for trouble.

He caught his man, disarmed him and tied him to a corral post, whereupon with Indian cruelty, he proceeded to shoot the helpless man to pieces. Then he cut an ear from the corpse and cured it, thereafter always carrying it in a vest pocket. When Slade came into a barroom, ordered a drink and flung down the dried ear on the bar, demanding "change from that!" the patrons of the place grew hushed for they knew he was about to embark on a spree of drinking and shooting which too frequently led to killing.

For a responsible official, Slade had so little control over his temper and the killing urge in him that it is surprising he lasted as long as he did. The story is told of a man who, drinking with Slade and apparently trying out the superintendent's reputation, turned to him and said, "I dare you shoot me."

Slade drew his gun and killed him. This seems incredible to us today; certainly it is evidence enough of a mind far from normal. Yet the authorities ruled that Slade had acted with provocation and he was never punished.

He kept order along the Pony Express trail, broke up gangs of horse thieves, usually by tracking down and killing a few of them. He trailed four suspected hold-up men to a ranch, kicked in the door and started shooting. Two went down, dead before they hit the floor, the third dying.

The fourth, all courage gone at this display, jumped from a window and ran for his life. Slade leaned nonchalantly on the sill and made his score a four with a single last shot.

His idea of fun was to completely wreck a saloon—smash the mirrors, shot out the lamps, send the customers hunting cover. And the least sign of resistance, or even an attempt to restrain him meant a killing, for when aroused the man was deadlier than a cobra and with no more sense of value for human life.

He was a strange person to be entrusted with the important responsibility of keeping the mails running. Yet he turned in a creditable job; kept his men and horses on their toes and the mails moving without breakdown. No doubt his reputation alone discouraged horse thieves and holdup men.

Joseph Slade came to the sort of end which might have been predicted for him. He drifted to Virginia City after his days on the Pony Express where he continued his personal reign of terror. But his killings becoming a little too much for even those primitive forces of law and order, he was at last caught by the Vigilantes and hanged by the neck until dead.

Answers to Questions on Page 167

1. A "fast" brand is a deep, permanent, legitimately registered brand. A "slow" brand was one lightly seared by rustlers while under observation, so that later on it could be changed.

2. Ben Thompson. In Tascosa, Texas, Masterson got into a fight with some cowboys and was shot in the knee. As he fell, Thompson, who was dealing faro at the saloon, leaped to stand over Masterson and with drawn gun protected him from the cowboys who were going to kill him.

3. A mountain man was an old-time trapper, so called because he often disappeared into the hills for two or three years at a time and only reappeared when he had collected a large catch of furs.

4. A mule-skinner did not "skin" mules, he drove them. A freighter who used mules to pull his wagon was a mule-skinner. If he used oxen he was a bull-whacker.

5. Quantrell, the Border raider, was chased by 4,000 cavalry and 5,000 additional troops guarded Border towns from his raids.

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At last! Practically anyone can now paint his car with WYPE! No previous car-painting experience necessary. You get a beautiful high-gloss job that gives you an expensive finish such as is sprayed on by Professional Auto Painters—at a fraction of regular cost! With WYPE you need **NO** BRUSH, **NO** SPRAY, **NO** MASKING! Just **WIPE ON** with Powder Puff—which we furnish at no extra charge. You get a brilliant, glossy finish that is truly "factory-like." No streaks. No lap-marks. Guaranteed for TWO years not to crack, peel, chip or fade, if simple directions are followed. Takes about an hour to apply. Dries dust-free in an hour. WYPE comes in nine most popular shades including those on newest model cars. Goes over any other color, lacquer or enamel.

MOST POPULAR COLORS

Black — Brewster (dark) Green
Maroon — Jewel (light) Green
Red — Washington (dark) Blue
Gray — Monticello (light) Blue
Sun Beige (light Tan)

$3.95 Per Quart

OVER 125,000 CARS PAINTED WITH WYPE

by the end of last season, and thousands more being painted every week. The final test of customer satisfaction—thousands of our new customers are being sent to us by old customers!

SEE YOUR DEALER or ORDER DIRECT
SEND NO MONEY · Get WYPE Today!

If your dealer can't supply you, just send us a postcard. We'll ship C.O.D. Just pay mailman for Wype, plus postal charges. Or send remittance with order and WE pay postage.

You're SURE You Are SAFE when You Paint with WYPE HERE'S WHY!

TESTED BY U. S. Testing Co., Inc.

Leading Scientific Testing Laboratory

Report No. 87496
Jan. 5, 1948

and found to conform to the claims and guarantee of the Wype Corporation.

No higher or more rigid standards are set by any Testing Laboratory. United States Testing Company conducts scientific tests for the world's foremost organizations and is accepted as a leading authority on such tests.

For Your Protection

Before you buy any automobile paint, ask for proof that it has passed tests by a nationally known testing laboratory. Remember the value of your car! You can **TRUST** Wype.

2-YEAR GUARANTEE

We Guarantee WYPE against cracking, peeling, fading or chipping for two years after application, if applied according to directions furnished. Your money cheerfully refunded if WYPE does not live up to this Guarantee.

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APPLY in ONE HOUR — DRIES to GLISTENING PROFESSIONAL FINISH

WYPE is a new Miracle Enamel for Autos. It is NOT a wax or polish but a hard high lustre ENAMEL finish! With WYPE, ANYONE can do a beautiful job! Order a quart to paint your car or to get started in this BIG-MONEY Business!

NO STREAKS OR LAPMARKS LOOKS LIKE SPRAY JOB

Wype Does the Job!

"Wype is really amazing! It dried out so perfectly with not a mark showing! We were all very happy about the completely NEW finish on our very old car. Wype has been on our car for one year and has stood the rigors of an Iowa winter with no bad results."—G. J. Campbell, Charles City, Iowa.

Used WYPE—Sold Car for $200 More

"Congratulations to Wype for production of the marvelous new paint, Wype. Wype has been definitely satisfactory. Needless to say, my husband was astonished, but, oh, so pleased. We realized about $200.00 more profit on our car when we sold it. Any lady, who can apply her own make-up, can certainly paint her own car!" — Mrs. Noma M. Burnette, Parris Island, S. C.

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